DEMELZA CARLTON

Once Upon a Mermaid

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Once Upon a Mermaid: Four Mermaid Tales

Demelza Carlton

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Ocean's Justice

Demelza Carlton

Book 1 in the Siren of War series

One

If I never saw the sea again, it would be too soon.

"She's too much trouble. Too turbulent to do what she must. Send her away somewhere so she can learn obedience. Then she may return."

"She's too young – barely eighteen. She's still upset over his death. Surely we should wait before we send her anywhere."

"No. She did what needed to be done and he's dead by her hand. She's understandably upset, but that will fade. He was only a man. I say we send her away and see what she's capable of accomplishing. What say you, child?"

My mouth still tasted bad at the words I'd spat at the vicious old women, but I'd say the same thing again in a heartbeat. "I hate you. I loved him. He didn't deserve to die and I will NEVER obey your orders again."

My defiance was futile. What did it get me? A small raft drifting across the Indian Ocean, with nothing but the sound of waves and the smell of salt and coal-smoke.

Smoke meant a ship. I was saved.

I squinted into the sunlight, but the waves hid the vessel from me. Maybe I was looking the wrong way. I didn't have the strength to sit up and see.

Rough hands seized me. I struggled, but my weakness won.

Blue eyes drifted above, the same colour as the ocean below. A tangle of wiry seaweed obscured the rest of the man's face.

"It's all right, lass. I'll take care of you."

Darkness took me first.

Two

"Miss? Can you tell me your name? Can you even hear me?" A clammy hand touched my forehead.

I focussed on the words and tried to translate them. I responded to the only one I understood. "Maria."

"Your name is Maria?"

My neck felt stiff as I nodded and opened my eyes.

"I'm Charlie. Charles Seaborn, but everyone calls me Charlie. The other men said you wouldn't live, but Mr McGregor said any girl who could rig that raft and survive long enough to be rescued wasn't going to die in her bed. Mr Allchin, the cook, is going to be furious when he finds out I won my bet. When we reach the Cape, I'm going to use the money to pay for my first woman and...beg pardon, miss. Maria, I mean." The boy reddened, but it didn't slow his words. "Some of the other men are saying you're something supernatural, seeing as you look like Venus and all, on account of having no clothes. Not like them skinny flappers. You have bosoms. The men talk about them a lot. A few say you're bad luck and we never should have rescued you, because you'll doom us like your last ship, but if you were going to sink ships, you wouldn't be floating around on a raft with no clothes and no food or water, a breath away from death. Doesn't make sense. Are you hungry, miss?"

Charlie held out a round, flat piece of metal, topped with a smaller, brown, oval slab. "It's bread, miss. Bread with marmite." He broke a small piece off the slab and popped it into his mouth. He pulled a face. "I don't like marmite – my mum makes me eat it for my health, she says, and Mr Allchin says you must eat it so you don't get beri-beri after so long at sea. Can you remember the name of your ship?"

I still didn't understand his words – but I did register that the slab was food. I reached for it, inclining my head in gratitude to the boy, before I gingerly took my first bite of marmite sandwich. It was the consistency of sponge and it tasted like the sea, but I chewed, swallowed and forced myself to take another bite. My mouth was as dry as dune sand and the additional salt didn't help. Swallowing was painful.

"Drink, miss?" Charlie held out a cup of liquid.

I seized it and sat up, tipping the cup's contents into my mouth. The second mouthful of salty, sponge-like sandwich went down far more smoothly than the first. I wished for the sweet flesh of a fresh fish, but it looked like only marmite was on the menu, whatever that might be.

A choking noise made me look up at Charlie's red face. He seemed to be staring at my chest. "Um, miss? Maria? The Captain found some clothes for you, seeing as you don't have any. Men's clothes, as we're all men here. To protect your...modesty, miss." The boy reddened further as his hands described the curves he couldn't tear his eyes away from.

The rough blanket that had previously covered my body now bared my skin to the waist, so I pulled it up again. This seemed to break the boy from his trance and he stepped away to retrieve a

small pile of folded fabric. He shook out a creamy-coloured item that turned out to be a shirt similar to his, which he held out to me. I took the shirt and slipped it over my head, thankful that I didn't have to fumble with the shell buttons under his watchful eyes, for they were already fastened. Next came the pants, which were almost identical to those he wore – including the length of rope threaded through the belt loops. I shifted to the edge of the bunk, so I could put these on, too. The sight of my bare legs seemed to mesmerise the boy almost as much as my breasts had. Perhaps he'd never seen either before.

The pants were much too wide at the waist – I had to hold them up to prevent them from puddling around my ankles. I pulled on the rope, ending up with the length of hemp in my hand and the waist of my pants clutched in the other.

"Ooh, miss, you have to thread it back through those bits there and then tighten it with both ends and cross the ends over and..." Charlie's hands gestured as he attempted to illustrate the words I didn't understand. Bewildered, I tried to follow his hand movements, but the pants slid down and hit the deck.

Deep laughter erupted from behind Charlie and we both turned to see who found my ineptitude funny. What I'd mistaken for seaweed was the man's bristly beard, now tamed to a short pelt across his chin and upper lip. Ocean-blue eyes regarded me with amusement as the man who owned them strode into the cabin. "Caught with your pants down, boy. Very compromising for the lady's honour, especially when we don't even know her name."

"Oh, no, Mr McGregor, you see, she was putting her clothes on and I was trying to help, only I don't think she's worn men's clothes before and these don't fit so well and I couldn't explain how to tie a rope belt and..." The boy continued with his endless sentence-story without pausing for breath, but Blue Eyes had eyes for no one but me.

His gaze was frankly curious, but arrogant, too, in a way that turned my confusion and fear to courage. I straightened, returning his gaze with all the pride of my position. No matter what I wore or where I stood, I wouldn't let this man cow me. Instead, I wanted to tell him to stop his insolent scrutiny. As I lacked the words in his language, I let my stare convey the message for me.

Charlie fell silent and moved aside. Blue Eyes stood before me, close enough to touch, yet he didn't lift his hand nor break the lock that held his eyes and mine. "I think this lady has a lot more honour at stake than we first thought. My lady, what's your name?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but I found my throat too dry to make a sound. This man did strange things to my body with merely his voice and his eyes.

"Maria," Charlie supplied. "That's the only thing she's said. But she was so hungry she ate a whole marmite sandwich and drank all the water."

"Fetch some more water for Lady Maria, boy. And tell Captain Foster she's awake and receiving visitors."

Charlie nodded rapidly. "Yes, Mr McGregor." He hurried out.

Blue Eyes dropped to a crouch at my feet, gathering up my pants. "Permit me to assist you, Lady Maria. We have no maids and no other women aboard, but I'll do the best I can." He pulled the fabric up to my waist, snaking the rope through the loops and tightening it in one swift move, taking my breath away. "On second thought, you should probably tuck this shirt in. That way, it will hide your assets better." His hand stroked my shirt against my skin, smoothing it beneath the waistband of my pants. Heat flooded my body at every caress and my heart beat faster still.

NO! This man wasn't Giuseppe and I wouldn't betray his memory with this strange man, despite his warm hands and ocean-coloured eyes.

He noticed my sudden stiffness and said, "I'm sorry, Lady Maria, but I'm not used to dressing ladies. You must think me very clumsy. I don't mean to take liberties. I'll be as quick as I can." He tied the rope at my waist, avoiding touching me again. "There."

The pants hung from my hips, but they didn't fall, and the shirt ballooned out from my shoulders to my waist, almost hiding my breasts completely. I looked like him and Charlie now. I wanted to thank him, but I didn't know the words to use. Nor did I know Blue Eyes' name.

I patted my chest, as Charlie had when he told me his name. "Name Maria," I said, wishing I knew more of his language.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Lady Maria, and I hope you don't think too badly of us for offering the best we have. If we knew we'd have a female passenger aboard, we might've..."

I shook my head, tears of frustration springing to my eyes. "No lady. Name Maria. Name?" In desperation, I reached out and touched the front of his shirt. I felt hard muscle beneath. "Name?"

He glanced down at my hand before meeting my eyes. "You mean I've seen you undressed, touched your body and helped you dress, but I haven't had the good manners to tell you my name? Good God, what you must think of me. I'm so sorry." He covered my hand with his. "My name's William McGregor, lass, and I'm not normally such a brute. I don't know if you remember, but 'twas I who pulled you off that raft. We thought you were dead, but I swore I'd check anyway, and I was never so relieved to see those blue eyes of yours staring up at me in terror. I didn't mean to frighten you then, lass – but you gave us all a good scare first."

So many words that I wished I knew the meaning of. I tried to repeat the ones I wanted. "Will...William. Mug....Mug..." I closed my eyes in defeat. I hadn't understood the man's name – I'd lost it.

I felt his fingers tighten around mine. "That's right, lass. You can just call me William if you like. Much easier than McGregor for those who aren't used to it. Unless you tell me your family's name, I'll be calling you by your Christian name, too, so it's fitting."

I bowed my head, feeling my lips lift in a smile for the first time since Giuseppe died. "William."

Three

"She's awake and up and about, just like Charlie said. I thought the boy was exaggerating, yet here she is. Good to see you survived your ordeal, miss," the older man with a peaked cap said as he stepped into the tiny cabin. He held his hand out to me. "Captain Foster of the *Trevessa*, miss."

I took his hand, as I knew was the custom, and swallowed. "Maria, Captain Foster."

"Can you tell us what happened, Maria? How did you come to be floating on that raft in the middle of the ocean? There are no ships reported missing, though with the storms we've seen since we left Fremantle, it's surprising. Were you on a smaller vessel – a yacht, perhaps?" Captain Foster asked.

I looked from one man to the other, wishing I could answer, but I didn't understand a word. Both men seemed to be waiting for me to say something, yet I had no idea what.

Captain Foster coughed. "Half the crew are saying that you're some kind of sea monster, that you murdered everyone aboard your last ship before you sank it and that you'll do the same here. Are you here to kill us all, Maria?"

"Captain!" William roared so loudly that I jumped. "The girl's been through quite an ordeal. I hardly think you should be accusing her of things only a superstitious native would believe."

The captain's voice remained calm. "Yet you're the one shocked, not her. Either she did sink her last ship or the girl doesn't understand a word I just said. You don't speak English, do you, Maria?" His eyes appeared to bore into mine, as if he might extract his answers this way. I stared back calmly. I needed to learn their language so that I could communicate – if only to tell this man that I didn't understand. He cleared his throat. "German, maybe. *Fräulein, Sie sind hier, um uns zu töten*? Or Dutch - *mevrouw, bent u hier om ons te doden*?" (Miss, are you here to kill us?)

I understood a little of this and tried to reply. "*Niet doden. Levend*." (Not dead. Alive.)

Captain Foster burst out laughing. "By God, her Dutch is worse than mine. We pick up a shipwrecked girl and she can't understand a word we say, nor tell us what happened. What do you suggest, McGregor? You fished her up."

"I'll go up against any man who wants to throw her back," William said fiercely.

The captain seemed uncomfortable as he shifted position. "It may come to that. They're a suspicious lot and the fog when we left Fremantle made many of us uneasy. I have a ship to run and no time to protect the girl. This ship is no place for a woman, but while we have one on board..."

"I'll take care of her, captain. After all, I'm just a passenger aboard your ship – what else do I have to do during the voyage? At least she's easy on the eyes and she doesn't say much." William extended his elbow toward me and I stared at it, uncertain of what he wanted. After a moment, he took my hand and laid it on his forearm. "I'll show her the mess, so she knows where to find what passes for food on this tub." Towing me behind him, he led the way along a metal tunnel and up the ladder to where I could hear the clamour of many voices. William smiled at me, tightening his grip on my hand. "Time to introduce you to the rest of the crew, lass. Just flash that pretty smile and you'll enchant them all, same as you have me."

I swallowed and passed through the doorway with him. A few heads turned to stare and silence fell.

"This is Maria, lads. Now, she doesn't say much and we don't think she speaks English, but that's no excuse not to treat her like the lady she is." Benches scraped across the deck as every man in the room rose – more than thirty of them, I guessed. I smiled and inclined my head in response to what I recognised as a gesture of respect. "That's right. She's been through a lot before we found her on that bit of flotsam she used for a raft, so remember your manners and help the lady if she needs it."

One man said something in a low voice, his hands describing enormous breasts in front of his own flat chest. The man beside him guffawed loudly, which drew the attention of many other men.

"Anyone who doesn't show her proper respect will answer to me," William continued, fixing his gaze on the two men who'd made noise.

Silence lasted for a few seconds more before William pulled me toward the back of the room. The scents of what the men were eating intensified with each step toward the source – a counter that held metal pans of unfamiliar food. No, not all. One held..."Beras!" I exclaimed, recognising the rice.

The white-hatted man behind the counter stared at me. "If she eats that, she'll get beri-beri. She needs to eat more of my marmite..." He reached down and produced a large jar filled with the unpleasant paste I'd eaten earlier.

I stared the man in the eye and shook my head. I pointed at the rice.

William laughed and passed me a metal plate. "Allchin, if the lady wants rice, that's what she gets. She might want a taste of your stew, too. I'll take my serving of stew with bread, thank you."

Allchin ladled a thick, lumpy, brown liquid onto William's plate and handed him two slices of bread. I received a mound of rice, which was quickly swamped by a sea of brown liquid. "Looks like the demon's tit, where you're going, McGregor," Allchin said, nodding at my plate. "Christmas Island, paradise for bird crap and crabs."

William laughed again. "I've heard those crabs are good eating. It'll be a damn sight better than your cooking, man." He grabbed some clinking metal things and guided me to the empty end of one table.

With a quick glance at the other men, I climbed onto the bench seat as William sat across from me. His handful of metal implements clattered to the table in front of me and I reached for them, directing a questioning look at William. He nodded and seized one with pointed tines at one end. He stabbed a brown lump on his plate and lifted it to his mouth.

That was fine for him with his plate full of large chunks of food but spearing the rice seemed like an exercise in futility. I looked down the table and was relieved to see a dark-haired man using a tool with a shallow depression on its end to shovel rice and liquid into his mouth. I picked up a spoon and cautiously scraped a little of the food onto it. My hand shook as I lifted it to my mouth.

The texture was mushy and the taste was bland, to say the least. I chewed and swallowed, spooning a slightly larger serving for my next mouthful. This was nothing like the food from home, which I

might never taste again. Warm tears spilled down my cheeks and I wiped them away, not wanting to show weakness in front of so many strangers.

"Not as good as home cooking, is it, lass?" William asked, grinning over a large mouthful of food. His eyes held sympathy, as if he could read my thoughts.

I managed to smile, before laboriously continuing with my meal.

"I should get you some tea," William said, rising. I moved to follow him, but he gestured for me to sit down.

He returned with two cups of steaming, red-brown liquid. "Just the way I like it – brewed thick, like it is in the mining office back home. The tea lady used to say that the bottom of the teapot was still tarred by the first leaves when the mine opened, a century ago."

I accepted the cup and lifted it to my lips.

"No, wait! You'll burn yourself if you –" He tried to snatch the cup from my fingers.

Too late. My mouthful of hot liquid burned both my tongue and the roof of my mouth, but I couldn't emit my wail of pain without spitting the tea in William's face. Whimpering, I swallowed, feeling the heat slide down my throat. Betrayed, I stared at William. Had he intended to hurt me?

His stricken expression told me the answer, followed by his anguished tone as he said, "Did you hurt yourself? I'm so sorry. I didn't realise you wouldn't know what to do with tea. Here, you sip it slowly, like this." He lifted his own cup and slurped a small amount of liquid. I scanned his face for signs of distress or pain, but there was none. "You try it." He took another tiny sip.

I cautiously grasped my cup again and brought it to my mouth with both shaking hands. Slowly, I tipped it so that a tiny trickle hit my tongue. Now it didn't burn me – but I could taste the foul brew. It was like drinking diluted mangrove mud. I think I preferred the burn to the taste. Yet, in the face of William's desperate expression, I drank it anyway and was rewarded by his nervous smile.

"My mum always said a cup of tea could soothe all the troubles in the world. No matter how far from home we are, at least there's tea," he said.

"Tea?" I enquired, pointing at our cups.

William grinned. "An important word to remember, lass. Where there's tea, there's civilisation."

Trying not to grimace, I drank the stuff, wondering what kind of backward people willingly drank river mud.

Four

Once dinner was over, William escorted me back to my cabin. I noticed he braced his arms against the bulkheads as he walked, to maintain his balance as the ship moved in the stormy swell, and I found myself doing the same. The ship's motion made my stomach queasy, but the feeling soon passed as I learned to move with the ship. After all, my tiny raft had moved far more in the waves and I'd managed to sleep on that. I hummed quietly to myself as we walked, feeling my body relax further as the soothing song did its work.

When we reached my cabin, William closed the door and turned to face me. His face seemed paler than before. He covered his mouth quickly, as if he were attempting to mask the sound of his belch. "Beg pardon, lass." He swallowed a couple of times before he continued, "The captain and I agreed that it'd be best if I stayed here tonight. For your safety, of course."

Between his troubled expression, darkened eyes and rigid stance, I found grounds for a strong premonition of danger. Something was wrong and I didn't trust this stranger enough. I pointed at him, then extended my arm toward the door. "Go," I said.

He stood firm, shaking his head. "No go. Whether you like it or not, lass, you won't budge me. You'll be sleeping in the upper bunk tonight and I'll take the one below you." His pointed finger stabbed at me, the upper bunk, himself and the lower bunk, while his angry eyes challenged me.

I held his gaze for a few long seconds, before deciding to scramble up the ladder to the top bunk. I stretched out on the thin mattress, suddenly realising how tired I was. The ship moved in the waves, rocking me like a mother would a fretful baby. I opened my eyes to find William watching me.

"Rest, Maria. I swear you have nothing to fear from me. I'll be a right gentleman, here below you." With slow, deliberate movements, he lay down on the lower bunk, where I'd been sleeping only a few hours before. "I know you don't know a thing about me, but I'd change that if I could. How about I tell you a little about myself? Let me know if you grow bored, lass." His voice became gentler and more reflective.

Deciding I must have imagined the risk, I relaxed. I was hardly helpless – as he'd find out if he did pose a danger to me. In the meantime, I'd conserve my energy and listen to his melodic voice.

"I have two brothers and a sister. While all three of them were content to stay in Scotland, working, marrying and bringing up their children as McGregors have been doing for centuries, I was never content. I wanted adventure, like I read in my books. Too young to enlist in the Great War, I did my engineering studies with many other lads who were eager to work on all the new technological advances. Warships, weapons, vehicles that could travel further and faster than anything we'd ever seen. My best friend was a lad who'd lived in Japan for all his life – Japanese mother, English father. He was fascinated by improving land for higher crop yields – he said with all the new scientific discoveries in chemistry, we could grow enough food for everyone and no one would ever starve again. Crazy, I tell you – but it turned out his father was a partner in a shipping venture which shipped some of these miracle growth agents to Japan. The chemicals come from mines and

extracting the raw material is quite an undertaking. So when he heard of a position on the other side of the world, he thought of me. He and his father wrote letters to some very important people and the next thing I knew, I was hired to run a guano mine in a place I've never heard of. But first, I had to be trained to represent Britain in its colonies, for that's what this place is. All it did was scare the hell out of me.

"A few weeks at the Imperial Institute in London, on the Tropical African Administrative Service training course and I'm supposed to be an expert at managing a new colony. I'm an engineer. I know steam and mining, like my father and my grandfather. There are so many insects that can kill you in Africa, I don't know half the names. And no one's ever heard of the place I'm going – except to tell horrible stories about it. They say there are crabs there – bigger than coconuts – that can crack your head open as you sleep..." The words faded as the man retched and I heard liquid spatter. He coughed and said, "Beg pardon, lass. No one told me I'd be sick as a dog on the sea. Give me land and I'll never leave it again. I imagine you feel the same way."

I peered over the side of the bunk, just in time to see him set the bucket on the floor and wipe his mouth with the back of his hand.

"One good thing about tasteless food is that it's not so bad bringing it back up again. I learned that in the North Atlantic, fresh out of Liverpool. Captain Foster said that the storm was something called a hurricane. The Americans can keep the damned things, I tell you, lass..."

His deep, purring voice continued, lulling me to sleep. I came to understand that "lass" was his name for me and I wondered what it meant. I slipped into a doze, feeling comfortable for the first time.

A creak and a clunk jerked me from sleep to alertness. The door swung open against the bulkhead and a shadow blocked the corridor lights.

"Women aboard ship is bad luck," a new voice growled. The sound was menacing and my eyes scanned the room in search of a weapon. The hulking new man grumbled some more, but his words meant as much to me as the rumbling steam engine beneath us. More worrying were the steps he took into the room – approaching the bunks.

I drew in a silent breath, steeling myself for whatever I'd need to do in order to defend myself.

The man leaned over the lower bunk and seized William. "Send you back to the ocean where you belong," the man grunted, trying to lift him.

In a flurry of blankets, William delivered a blow to the man – whether from his fist or foot, I couldn't tell – and sent him crashing against the bulkhead. William's fist caught the man under the chin next, jerking his head up before his whole body slid down the wall to slump on the deck.

"Get out of here, Barrett. If I ever see you near the girl again, I'll break your jaw and throw you overboard instead."

The man – Barrett, I presumed – scrambled to his feet and staggered to the doorway, holding onto the bulkhead as he struggled to remain upright. "The girl will curse and kill us all, McGregor. She's a

siren, sent to seduce us and sink the ship. You're defending a monster."

"Shut your mouth before I break some more of your teeth. Maria's been through enough. She doesn't need to hear your superstitious nonsense and nor do I. Go make yourself useful and stoke the boiler. The sooner we get to shore the sooner you'll be shot of her – and me, too. Until then – if you have anything to say to her, you can say it to me and I'll decide if she needs to hear it or if I need to smash your face." I didn't understand William's angry words, but his meaning was clear – he pointed at the door and the other man left, spitting bitterly on the deck.

Strange – both here tonight and on the mess deck, I'd seen the other men regard William with an odd mixture of contempt and respect. Much like I regarded my elders, the women who had sent me so far from home. Yet this man didn't seem much older than I. I wished I could ask him how he'd earned a reputation that made the larger man back down, or the whole crew stand up, as they had in the mess.

I was surprised to feel William's warm hand over mine.

"Like I said, I'll make sure no harm comes to you, lass. I may be ill, but I'm still a match for any man on this crew."

I stared at William until I became lost in his liquid eyes and he laughed at me. His laughter lit a warmth inside me that I hadn't felt since Giuseppe – but Giuseppe was dead by my hands. He would never touch me again and I vowed no other man would, either. My heart and my love belonged to a dead man.

"Good night, Maria."

I didn't dare speak a word – I understood so little of what he said and needed to learn so much before I could communicate.

Five

What if I could never return home again? What if I had to make my life with these people, in a world I didn't understand? Alone. I hugged my knees to my chest, peering out the porthole at the matching grey sky and seas. I could do what Barrett had suggested last night – throw myself into the waves and let the ocean take me.

William knocked on the bulkhead beside me, startling me out of my gloomy thoughts. "I brought you a gift, lass. Something no lady should be without." He held out a piece of tortoiseshell, carved into a row of teeth. "I bought this for my sister. I meant to send it to her before we left Fremantle, but I forgot. Now it's yours."

I took the gift from him, smiling my thanks.

"I don't mean to sound rude, but I think the words you're after are, 'Thank you.'" He imitated my smile and the way I bowed my head, then raised his voice to a high-pitched squeak. "Thank you, William."

I stared at him, then slowly repeated the words. "Th...thank you, William."

"You're welcome, lass. Now, I have a favour to ask. An ulterior motive, perhaps." He paused, but I didn't say a word, so he continued, "Back home, they say a girl with her hair unbound is unleashing a storm to sink ships at sea. Maybe that's just the North Sea and the Indian Ocean's too big to be controlled by a woman's hair, but it makes me nervous and Captain Foster's been worried since we left port. Would you...would you please pin your hair up?" He coughed. "If you don't know how, would you let me do it? The sister I bought the comb for...I used to help her with her hair before school in the mornings. She said I had gentler hands than Mum." He sat beside me on the bed and lifted a cautious hand toward my hair. He stroked the salt-encrusted length of it, right down to the ends lying on the bed beside me. "Now, I heard one of the Singhs asking Allchin for some cooking oil for his hair, so while Allchin was serving breakfast, I liberated some for you." He lifted a large can that I hadn't noticed until now and he shook it, so I could hear the slosh of a little liquid inside. "Would you...would you like me to help you?"

I looked at him, longing to be able to answer him – or even understand his question.

"I wish you could understand me. I'm sure you'll let me know if you want me to stop." He lifted the can over my head and I felt something trickle through my hair. I kept my eyes on William's scared smile, hoping I didn't look equally nervous. He set the can down with a clatter and lifted both hands to my head. "I suppose I just have to spread this through your hair." He threaded his fingers through my hair, gently massaging my scalp with his fingertips, then smoothed my hair between his hands.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation. No one had ever touched me like this. Not my mother, not my friends, not even Giuseppe. A quiet moan of pleasure escaped from my lips and my eyes shot open, staring at William in panic.

He chuckled. "I believe that's a most emphatic 'yes'. More, Maria?"

A word I understood! I beamed. "Yes. Oh, yes, William. Thank you."

He leaned closer to me. "You should turn around, so I can reach your hair better. If you moan like that again, God help me, but I'm going to have to kiss you." He wrapped his hands around my hair, pulling it toward him, and I twisted my body away from his to make it easier. "That's probably safest. Comb?"

I felt William pluck the comb from my fingers and start stroking it through my hair, pulling the tangles from my tresses. He said, "My sister used to tell me all her troubles when I did her hair. As if the comb loosened her tongue. I doubt you'll be as forthcoming, but if you have anything you wish to say, I'm listening, lass."

Wishing I had some way of thanking him for his kindness, I stared down at my body, covered in borrowed clothes. This was all I had and something in the hesitant way he touched me told me that my body wasn't the sort of currency he'd accept. But what else did I have to offer?

The ship rolled beneath us and I clutched at the bunk to avoid being pitched onto the floor, remembering William's illness last night. There was one thing I could offer.

My voice quiet and quivering at first, I lifted it in the same soothing song I'd hummed last night – the one that had calmed my unsettled stomach. Breathing deeper, I increased the volume, putting more power into my voice. This song reminded me of home and the family I might never see again, but it was also the sound of comfort, for my mother had sung the same melody for as long as I could remember. Once I'd started, I couldn't stop. I sang of loss and grief, but I also sang of hope, for the unexpected bliss this man held in his skilful hands.

I let the last note hang in the air before I silenced it, wishing there was more I could offer him.

William lifted my hair, laying it over my shoulder, and placed the end in my hand. I looked down and saw the satin ribbon that bound the braided length – braided just like the rope that Giuseppe had tried and failed to hold on to in the surging waves. The waves that had stolen him from me and drowned him. I burst into tears.

"Here – here." William's arms folded around me, almost crushing me to his chest. I'd never been held so securely – never felt this safe with anyone. "I didn't think I did such a bad job. You look beautiful, Maria, and with your amazing voice and lovely song, you've absolutely bewitched me. The crew will stop calling you a sea monster now they see how beautiful you are. They'll call you an enchantress instead."

Embarrassed, I tried to stem the flood. I swallowed hard, staring fixedly at the fishbone pattern of my braid. He had done me another kindness and I'd responded by soaking his shirt with silly tears. "Thank you, William," I said steadily. "Thank you."

William's grip on me tightened as he reached into his pocket and withdrew a folded piece of cloth. Pressing the handkerchief into my hand, he replied, "Any time, lass. The song alone was worth it. Now let's hope we've seen the end of storms for this voyage." He seemed thoughtful for a moment, before he added, "How'd you like me to give you a grand tour of the ship?"

I heard the question in his tone, but he could have been asking me for anything. Staring into his eyes, I found myself nodding.

He took my hand. "Then come with me."

Six

As we headed down the corridor toward the washroom, he tucked my arm under his, laying my fingers across his cotton-clad forearm. "The washroom you know," he said, waving his hand at the empty room. "There's another on the other side of the ship, where most of the crew sleep, for only the captain's quarters have running water. Captain's quarters are two doors down from ours." He pointed at a closed door, then turned into a corridor I hadn't used before and rounded a corner. "Here – crew quarters." William led me into a corridor almost identical to the one where our cabin was, only this had far more doors, much closer together.

I heard the sounds of splashing and raised men's voices, then laughter as a pale, gangly figure burst into the corridor.

"That's not funny! Those are the last pants I have, what with loaning one pair to Maria and all!" Charlie shouted reedily, the muscles in his bare backside clenching as he drew himself up. He turned, caught sight of us, and emitted a very feminine shriek as he tried to cover his genitals with his hands. One hand would have sufficed in the cold morning air.

I burst out laughing, which made Charlie's face turn red.

"Mr McGregor, you could have warned us," Charlie complained, edging back into the washroom. "Miss Maria shouldn't see men when we're...when we're..." His words were drowned out by a wave of loud laughter from inside the washroom.

I advanced, but William grabbed my arm. His cheeks were flushed, too. "Probably not the best place for a lady like yourself. We get pretty rowdy without women present and some of the men are in no fit state to be seen. We'd better start with the hold." His voice sounded uneasy and I wondered what I'd done to unsettle him. Was it my laughter at Charlie's unfortunate shrinkage? Surely he hadn't expected me to admire the modestly endowed boy.

William led the way silently down ladders and corridors until we were in the echoing bowels of the ship. Here, overhead lights provided all the illumination – no natural light percolated to this depth. He fastened his hands on a wheel set in the middle of a metal door and wrenched the wheel around. Several squeaky turns later, William pulled the wheel toward him and the door swung open with a protesting creak. "This is the cargo hold. Some sort of mineral Australia's shipping to Belgium for the factories there. It looks like the mud we pump out of the coal mines back home – not useful at all!" He pulled a tube out of his pocket and a weak beam of light shot out of the end of it, splashing against the far wall of the hold. Beneath the beam was a pool of dark mud, bounded by walls and a metal catwalk that ran around the edges of the large space. The light beam rose to illuminate the hatch in the ceiling. "One of the port inspectors fell through the hatch before they sealed it. He almost drowned before they pulled him out – that stuff is like quicksand. It'll suck you under without a trace if no one hears you scream."

The mud held little interest for me, but William's hand-held light tube was fascinating. I dropped to my knees, reaching for the metal length he held at waist height. He laughed and clicked the device,

extinguishing the light before another click blinded me as the bulb glowed to life. "It's a torch, lass."

"Torch?" I ventured, laying my hand on the surprisingly warm metal.

William's hand covered mine, pressing my finger down until a click turned the torch off. "If you want to play with it for a bit, it's all yours."

"Mr McGregor!" Charlie's voice leaped so high it broke. "What are you doing with Miss Maria?"

William stared down at me in shock for a moment before he jumped back, putting several feet between us. He waved the torch. "Showing her the hold and my torch, lad. Nothing...nothing inappropriate. She wanted a closer look at my torch and I didn't realise...if I'd thought how compromising it might look, I wouldn't have..." The front of his pants looked decidedly tight and uncomfortable.

Perhaps William wasn't as immune to my body as I'd thought, I reflected as I accepted Charlie's assistance to rise to my feet. I averted my eyes from the man's frantic, furtive wardrobe adjustments and followed Charlie instead.

The boy's hair was still wet, but he wore clothes as he led the way up the ladder. "You should see the engines, Miss Maria," he said eagerly. "The boiler room where the firemen work is like hell, but when you see how fast they stoke the engines – oh! It's like magic. You won't believe something so huge can go so fast."

William's muffled laugh behind me told me he was following us. "Lad, you have no idea," he muttered so quietly that I barely heard him, "but I think she might."

Seven

I stepped over the threshold and into a raging inferno. The heat hit me first, searing the very breath in my lungs. Reflected flames danced along the walls and in the sheen of blackened sweat on the men who fed the real fire that heated the boilers.

My memory stirred, sparked and burst into horrifyingly clear images of the *Emden* burning as dying men screamed...and so did I.

"It's all right, lass." William's arms closed around me, pressing my body against his so that all I could see were the blurred folds of his shirt. "Charlie was only joking about it being hell, weren't you, lad? This is the boiler room, where the firemen stoke the fires to heat the boilers that drive the ship. Nothing to fear here. The lad – we both thought you'd like to see the powerful engines speeding us to land. If you don't want to, there's no harm done. Do you want to see more of the ship, Maria?"

I looked up and glimpsed the ruddy light before I squeezed my eyes shut. "No. No more," I replied, shaking my head.

William half-carried me out into the corridor and I felt the welcome relief of the cool bulkhead beside me. Sucking in a calming breath, I drew myself up and looked into the boiler room. The hard-working men inside eyed me curiously, between furiously shovelling coal into the well-contained fire. The flames weren't consuming any part of this ship, except for the plentiful coal that fed its roaring boilers. As for the *Emden*...she was nothing but a burned-out hulk by now.

"What's wrong, Miss Maria? Don't you want to see the engines?" Charlie blocked the boiler room doorway, looking crushed.

William saved me from having to answer. "All that talk of hell must have frightened her, lad. I don't think she's ever seen anything like it. Now I'm going to take her up to the main deck for some much-needed fresh air, I think." He nudged me toward the ladder to the deck above and I closed grateful fingers on the handrail as I climbed, feeling the vibration from William's weight not far below me.

"Wait for me!" called Charlie as I reached the upper deck, his shoes clunking on the rungs as he followed us.

William waited while I climbed the last ladder, which led to the main deck. "Don't you have your apprentice duties?" he asked as Charlie came into view.

"Tell me what you're going to do with Miss Maria," Charlie insisted.

My eyes met William's as he glanced up at me. "I'm going to escort her to the mess deck and make her some tea." He laughed. "Why, do you think you can make a better pot of tea than I can, lad?"

I continued up, stepping out onto the main deck right in front of Captain Foster.

"Good day, Maria," he said. "Where is McGregor?"

"William?" I asked uncertainly and he gave a curt nod. I pointed down the ladder I'd just left, hearing the sounds of climbing.

William's head appeared, followed by the rest of him. "What's wrong, lass? Captain." He and the captain exchanged nods as I looked from one to the other.

"I thought you were taking care of the girl, McGregor. Maybe I should assign the boy to her instead. Why did I hear her screaming below decks?"

"I don't know," William began.

"Fire," I said firmly. "Fear...fire."

Charlie tumbled to the deck at my feet, breathing hard. "Miss Maria was afraid of the fires in the boiler room. I made a joke that it looked like hell in there and Miss Maria believed me, sir. Mr McGregor –"

"The engine room is no place for a woman!" Captain Foster exploded, glaring at Charlie and William. He pointed at Charlie. "You should be hard at work or you'll never be anything but an apprentice. Get below." He turned to William. "I don't want her wandering around below decks. It's dangerous." His eyes flicked to me and I saw fear in them. "For a woman to be alone in places like that. Don't let her out of your sight and keep to the main decks. I don't want her near the engine room again. You should get her safely back to her cabin."

Charlie turned and headed back down the ladder, glaring balefully at all of us. He seemed to reserve extra anger for William as the man's arm came to rest around my shoulders. "First, we're going to the mess deck for a cup of tea to settle her nerves. I want to try and ask her about what happened to her and I was hoping..." William coughed. "Have you heard anything over the wireless about her vessel? The one that was wrecked?"

Captain Foster shook his head. "I radioed to tell them about finding the wreckage she was floating on, but no one has word that any vessel has been lost in the storms. I haven't mentioned her because we might be ordered to return to Fremantle instead of heading to Durban as scheduled, so I want to wait until we're more than halfway. We have a better chance of finding an interpreter who understands her language there than in Australia, too. Anything you can find out about who she is and what she's doing out here...tell Allchin he can use my private stores if it'll help."

To my surprise, William winked at me as he took my arm. "There's an offer I don't need to hear twice. C'mon, lass, before he reconsiders. Have you ever tasted chocolate before? Chocolate?"

I stared at him, my feet moving automatically to keep pace with the hurrying man. What in the world was chocolate?

Eight

The mess deck was empty but for Allchin and a small, dark-haired man that I didn't know. William said something to Allchin in a voice so low I didn't hear the words, but the cook nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

The small man and William bowed their heads to one another, much like my people did. "MacuGuregoru-san," the man said.

William responded, "Kaito-san." He glanced at me. "This is Maria. Maria, Kaito-san is from Japan."

Kaito inclined his head. "*Hajimemashite*, Maria-san."

I smiled uncertainly and ducked my head. "Ha...hajimmy..." I looked to William, lost. I couldn't pronounce what Kaito had said, nor did I understand it.

"He said he's pleased to meet you, lass, or at least I think that's what he said. He might have asked about your health." William shrugged. "It's been a long time since I spoke any Japanese."

Kaito smiled. "It means both. Would you and Maria-san like to join me for tea?" He poured hot water from the kettle into a squat, shiny teapot. A wisp of steam curled up from the dark liquid.

I inhaled, then took another, deeper breath. The scent hit the back of my throat and transported me home. For a moment, I'd just finished a meal with my mother and sister. The brief flash of memory was so clear, but over so fast that tears sprang to my eyes. I'd never share a meal with either of them, ever again. I opened my eyes to find both men staring at me. The smell had strengthened and it was coming from Kaito's teapot.

"You like my tea, Maria-san?"

"Yes," I breathed. Surely the liquid wasn't the same brown stuff that William had given me. Each murky cup had looked and smelled like stewed seaweed and wet wood.

Kaito's smile didn't fade as he poured two cups of the fragrant tea. His teapot hovered over a third, empty cup. "MacuGuregoru-san?"

"No, I'll take my tea like we do at home." William lifted the large, brown teapot that dwarfed Kaito's black lacquered one, and poured his own tea. It was the darkest I'd ever seen it – or perhaps it was just in contrast to the fresh green of my drink. A splash of milk turned dark brown to tan, but it didn't attract me in the slightest.

"Maria-san," Kaito said, lifting his cup in salute. William did the same, as if this were some sort of ritual I didn't understand. Both drank together and I lifted my cup to do the same. The flavour was stronger than the smell and memory slugged me again, but I managed to control it this time as I sank onto a bench to cover my preoccupation with the past.

William sat across from me, slurping his tea with a smile pasted on his face.

The ship lurched beneath us and I grabbed the table to stop myself from slipping off the bench.

"Where did you learn Japanese, MacuGuregoru-san?" Kaito asked, his face paling as he sipped.

William appeared surprised at the question. "One of my friends at university was half-Japanese. He was a champion boxer, but he'd learned to fight in some ancient Japanese style and he wanted to continue to practice. I was the only one who'd beaten him in the ring – once! – so I offered to learn. We studied together for four years and I learned some Japanese when he couldn't remember the words in English. Bad juju fighting, the other boys called it, for it made me a better fighter." He took a deep draught of tea, which threatened to spill as the ship continued to move. "Or a worse one, if the boy was my opponent!"

Kaito smiled. "Did your friend study jujitsu in Japan? I would be interested in training with you some time. My father insisted I practice samurai hand-to-hand fighting every morning before breakfast and I fear I will forget his teachings if I don't continue to practice diligently." He ducked his head and I saw his knuckles whiten as he clung to the bench beneath him as if his life depended on it. "MacuGuregoru-san, Maria-san...please excuse me. My tea is yours." His hand shoved the teapot toward me before he staggered out of the door. His face was a delicate shade of green as he braced himself along the corridor and out of sight.

The ship was indeed moving more in the swell – there were waves within my cup when I set it on the table. Grateful for Kaito's gift, I poured more green tea for myself and took a moment to savour the smell.

"Stewed grass," William said, nodding at my cup. "I don't know how you can drink that stuff. It even turned Kaito green, though the ship rolling's usually enough to do that to me – no strange drink necessary. Maybe I'm getting my sea legs after all. A bit bloody late, but better late than never."

William's unsettled stomach didn't seem to bother him any more, I reflected, noting that he happily drank his foul brew without any sign of the distress Kaito suffered from the ship's motion.

"You're in luck!" Allchin said, hurrying across the deck as if the swell didn't bother him in the slightest. "I found a whole box of the stuff, but it took me some time to find it. It says Plaistowe's British chocolate on the outside, but it's not a name or a sweet I've ever heard of. Must be some strange colonial imitation of the Cadbury's back home. Untouched until now, so I brought you two bars." He set a tin plate on the table, adorned with two long, brown blocks of something. "I found a good bottle of rum, too. I thought we were out before we hit the Panama Canal, but it turned out there was one left behind the condensed milk. No idea why the captain would order so much of the stuff."

William glanced at me. "Keep the rum in reserve – and out of sight. You never know when you might need it for medicinal purposes."

Allchin grinned and winked. "I think I just might." He disappeared into the kitchen.

William's full attention turned to me. "Now, lass. You never did answer before. Have you eaten chocolate?" He waved at the brown bars.

"Chocolate," I repeated slowly, then shook my head and pressed my lips together. If this tasted like his tea, I wasn't touching it.

He laughed and leaned forward with a wicked smile on his face. "Maria, you are going to love me for the rest of your life for this. For a woman, I've heard it's better than the first time you..." He reddened and I wondered why. "Now, open your mouth."

I stared at him, mystified.

"Open your mouth, lass," he repeated, dropping his voice to a seductive purr. I may not have understood his words, but his tone brought a smile to my lips. He leaned closer, so that his deep ocean eyes bored into mine. His lips parted and so did mine, to draw a shaky breath into my suddenly dry mouth. I wanted to kiss this man, whose lips were but a breath away.

His finger grazed my lower lip as he slipped it inside my mouth. No, not his finger – a cold piece of the brown material, which he left on my tongue. His fingers pushed my chin up so that I closed my mouth on the morsel.

I closed my eyes, breathing deeply as I resisted the urge for violence that bubbled up. How dare he deny me the kiss he'd been so keen to give me, replacing his warm tongue with the cold substance I didn't want. The stuff was melting on my tongue, much like the butter he'd spread on my toast that morning. The first taste was bitter and I drew myself up to spit the offending object at his face.

"Wait, please," he implored, pressing his index finger over my lips as if he wished to hush me.

Buttery bitterness melted and sweetness filled my mouth like nothing I'd ever tasted before. My eyes flew open in surprise as the smooth confection slid down my throat. William's grin told me he knew exactly what I was thinking as he popped a piece of chocolate into his own mouth. He chewed it and broke off another piece. "More?"

"Oh yes," I breathed.

Together, we finished off both of the blissful bars before William's hands closed over mine on the table. "Maria, I need to know what happened to you. When you were afraid in the boiler room...was it because you've seen a ship on fire before? You feared this ship was on fire, too?"

I tried to summon the words. "Ship...fire. Dead men. Burning." The memory was still painfully clear. How much time must pass before it would fade?

He squeezed my hands. "You must have been terrified. A ship on fire, alone at sea, is a fearful thing. How did you escape?" My bewilderment must have showed, because he tried again. "You're not dead on the fiery ship. Not burned. Alive – how?"

I pulled my hands out of his and tried to show him.

His arms mirrored the arcs mine made. "You dived into the water and swam away?"

I circled my hands uncertainly. "Swim? Swim...ocean."

"What about sharks? Weren't you afraid of sharks? Or weren't there any?" he pressed.

"Sharks, yes," I began uncertainly. "No fear. Big fish." I held up a fist and feinted a punch in front of him. "Sharks...fear." My smile died on my lips at William's shock.

"You leaped off a burning ship into shark-infested waters and fought them off?" He shook his head in disbelief. "Maria, that's crazy. You can't possibly have...what was the ship's name?"

"Name...ship?" I repeated.

He nodded. "Yes. What was the name of the burning ship?"

I wet my lips. "*Emden*."

His brow furrowed. "I've heard that name before. It was a warship...a big victory for the British during the war. You can't have come from that. They only allow men on warships and anyway, it was sunk years ago at some island in the Indian Ocean. Here. It was sunk off some colony here!" He stared at me. "You're the daughter of some rich colonist out here, aren't you? Or...you're his wife." His eyes held hurt. "That's why you didn't scream like my sister or any normal girl would when you saw Charlie naked. You're not an innocent at all. You're a married woman. Married and...your husband will be looking for you. Combing the whole damn ocean in search of you, I bet."

From the warm, admiring man, he'd suddenly turned cold and distant. It was the name of the ship. It had to be. He knew what I'd done.

William's hands cupped my face, his sad eyes holding mine. "His name. Maria, tell me his name so I can help you return to his arms." He wiped my tears away with his fingers. "His name or the name of his ship. I'll find him and I swear I'll see you safely home to him."

"Giuseppe," I whispered, the tears flowing faster still. I tried to illustrate my words with my hands, in the faint hope that he'd understand. "Ship...sank and sharks...Giuseppe no swim. Sank. Sharks. Sharks...dead. Giuseppe dead." I laid my head on the table and sobbed. He was the only man I'd ever loved and the ocean took him away from me.

I felt the bench jump as William's weight landed beside me. Warm arms enveloped me, pulling me to his chest. "I'm sorry, lass. Not a wife – a widow and a newly bereaved one, at that. I'm so sorry. If I'd known, I wouldn't have pushed so hard. No wonder you didn't want to talk about it. To see the man you love drown and have to survive at sea, all on your own...I don't know a single woman who'd be brave enough to do what you did."

His unfamiliar words washed over me, but I could still hear his warm tone as he stroked my hair, holding me tight. My heart beat faster at each caress. Giuseppe was no longer the only man I'd ever loved. I was fast falling for someone else. I knew that if any man could mend my broken heart, it was William.

Nine

An ear-splitting noise woke me. For a moment, I was terrified – it sounded like the same blaring horn that called the crew to combat on warships. I'd seen enough of such battles to last a lifetime. The only thing louder than the call to arms in my memory were the screams of the dying – far too many for me to count.

I'd go over the side, into the water, before I'd witness another naval battle.

"Time to get dressed up and go for a walk, lass." William's voice was surprisingly calm. He grinned as he grabbed a towel to dry his freshly-washed face.

Why did the prospect of war make him so cheerful?

He hung the towel over the rail and turned to face me. Something saddened him and his voice turned soft and coaxing. "It's all right, Maria. I'm sure it's only another drill – the captain swears the regular drills while he was in the Royal Navy saved his life. Don't worry. I'll take care of you. Now, get down here before the captain comes looking for us. If the ship really is sinking, we don't want to be slow."

William held out his hands and I took them, sliding from the bunk to thump feet-first onto the deck. He led me out of the cabin, as unhurried as if we were headed to breakfast, but he bypassed the deserted mess hall. I wasn't sure where or why he was taking me, but my instincts told me to trust him. He'd had three days and two nights to attack me, if that was his desire. Of course he'd touched me, but, like his tone, he kept all contact between us both courteous and gentle. He hadn't even pulled my hair when he'd combed it.

The wind hit me as we reached the main deck – a cold air current that made me turn my face to it, closing my eyes and breathing deep to savour the freshness. It plastered my shirt against my chest and turned my nipples into hard chips of ice. Oh, how I loved it.

"Here. Take it, lass, before you freeze."

I felt something rough and gritty brush my arm, and opened my eyes. William held out his salt-encrusted, woollen jumper with an entreating look on his face. He clenched his other arm against his body, as if the wind chilled him more than it did me. I shook my head, laughing as I pushed the jumper away. I wanted as little as possible between me and the bracing breeze.

Reluctantly, he pulled it back over his head and grasped my hand again. He led me along the deck to a spot out of the wind. A crewman stood beside a large, open box, handing out canvas pillows with trailing ribbons. He already had one tied around his torso.

"Have you ever worn a lifejacket, lass?" William asked, pressing the surprisingly hard pillow against my chest. He helped me pull the awkward thing over my head before he tied the ribbons securely around me. When he was similarly trussed, he led me through a maze of boxes and crates and along the path that skirted the deck.

I scanned the grey-green waters, searching for the other ships that had provoked the call to arms, but I saw nothing but us, clear to the horizon. Turning to survey the sea in the other direction, I

bumped into something hard. I squeezed my eyes shut at the blinding pain in my head.

William's warm fingers touched my forehead. "Ooh, that was a nasty bump. You should watch where you're going – these lifeboats could save your life. You don't want to dent one with that hard head of yours." For a moment, the only sound was wind and that blaring horn, before he continued, "Are you all right? Do you want to lie down? I'll carry you back to the cabin when we're done, but we have to wait here until the whole crew's assembled."

I forced my eyes open. The stars had faded and the initial, shocking pain, too. The dull ache it left behind was bearable. I turned my eyes on the object I'd collided with – a small, wooden boat suspended at head height to catch the unwary. Another hung behind it and two more mirrored these on the starboard side of the vessel.

I lost interest in the boats as I realised the whole crew was standing on the deck and they all seemed to be staring at us.

"If you're this slow in a real crisis, McGregor, the lifeboats might launch without you, leaving you to your fate," Captain Foster said.

"You wouldn't leave without us, captain," William replied. "The sound of the alarm horns terrified Maria. You could have given the poor girl some warning. After the ordeal she's been through, it seems hardly fair to scare her into thinking this ship's sinking, too."

Captain Foster's expression hardened. "Just because a ship rescues you once, doesn't mean it's safe. I learned that in the Atlantic. Those German U-boats had it in for me that day. Maria!"

I jumped at the sound of my name, but my eyes were already on the angry captain.

"When you hear that sound, it means the ship's sinking and if you don't hurry, you'll sink with her and drown. Do you understand?" I stared at the man, mystified at what I'd done to make him look so desperate. He stomped his foot on the deck and waved his hands. "The ship. Tell me you know what a ship is!"

I wet my lips and pointed at the deck beneath my feet. "Ship," I said slowly.

"Hallelujah, she's not as stupid as we thought," a voice sneered and several men laughed.

Painstakingly, Captain Foster lifted one hand and rippled it like the swell beneath the ship. "Ocean." I nodded – this word I knew. He floated his other hand above the first. "Ship." I nodded again. His ship hand took a sudden dive, plunging down beneath the surface of his make-believe ocean. "Ship sinking."

"Ship sinking," I repeated warily, wondering what he knew of such things. Surely this ship wasn't...please, no! I raced to the rail, leaning over to stare at the waves. The ship didn't look any lower in the water than it usually did. I stormed back to the captain. "NO ship sinking."

William burst out laughing. "She's got you there, captain. You did scare the life out of her this morning for no good reason. I think we'd all be in for a tongue-lashing if she knew enough English. Thank God for small mercies."

Captain Foster's eyes bored into mine. "If the ship's sinking, that horn will blow." He stabbed a finger at the source of the blaring sound. "And you leg it up to the lifeboats if you want to live." He slapped the side of the nearest lifeboat with unnecessary force, making it rock in its davits. "That's it for today's drill. Get back to work." He wrenched his life jacket off and stalked to the box where they belonged.

Bewildered, I stood unmoving as a sea of men swept past me to follow the captain. William yanked my arm, pulling me behind the lifeboats to make way for the others to pass. He helped me remove my lifejacket and passed both of them to Charlie, who joined the queue of men waiting to return the bulky items to their box. The ship seemed eerily quiet when the siren ceased.

"Don't be afraid, lass," William said, lifting the cover on one of the boats. "These are much better than your flimsy raft and you survived on that. I heard stories of how shipwrecked Dutchmen and Englishmen have crossed this ocean in boats no bigger than our lifeboats – men who lived to find land. They didn't have the supplies ours do, either – and we can thank Captain Foster for that. He was cast into a boat just like these in the war and he survived. If our luck turns bad and we have to board these, I'll lift you aboard the captain's boat myself, for I know he'll steer us safely to land." He held out his arms. "Here, I'll help you up so you can take a look for yourself." I stepped closer and was surprised when his hands closed around my waist, lifting me into the air.

I panicked and caught the edge of the boat, swinging my legs up over the gunwale, and clumsily hooked my body into the craft. The plank seats stopped me from rolling to the bottom of the boat, but I had barely a second to catch my breath before the boat tipped dangerously and I had to cling to the bench to stop myself from falling out as William climbed over the side.

He dropped to his knees and wrenched open a locker beneath a bench. "Come and see." He gestured for me to come closer and I inched my way along the seat to look underneath it. William pulled a tin from the multitude crammed inside the locker and held it up. "Captain Foster's supplies. He refused to put to sea unless the lifeboats were stocked with as much condensed milk as water. He says he'll find a way to make it law – all lifeboats should carry condensed milk. One crazy Scotsman, trying to change the world." He laughed, but his eyes turned sad. "I didn't want to change it, only see it, but now I'm beginning to understand why my brothers wanted to settle down. Halfway round the world, in the middle of the ocean, and I finally see –"

"You planning on sailing away into the sunset with your little whore, McGregor? Is that what took you so long to appear on deck? You had to pull your cock out of her and get her clothes back on? Plenty of hard-working men on this ship – seems to me you should share, seeing as you're only a passenger and all." A hand caught my foot, almost yanking me out of the boat.

William grabbed me before I fell. "Leave the girl alone, Sciarra. You're lucky she doesn't understand a word of your filth – I'll let it go this time, but if you say it again, I'll break your face."

I twisted so I could see the grinning idiot behind me. I might not have understood his words, but I didn't like his tone, or his hands clutching at me.

"Go on, McGregor, just a taste," Sciarra wheedled, his tongue snaking toward my ankle.

Revolted, I kicked and felt the satisfying crunch as my feet met his face. He landed on his back on the deck. Shock morphed to fury on his face and he sprang to his feet. "You bitch..."

I shifted to a crouch, ready to leap out of the boat to tackle him to the deck, but William beat me to it, landing lightly on his feet between us. "Get the hell out of here, Sciarra, before I hurt you worse than she has."

I let myself down to the deck, glaring at the horrible man, his lip bleeding from the damage I'd inflicted. I itched to hit him again.

"Put a leash on her," Sciarra muttered as he stalked away.

William and I both stared after him until I felt his fingers close around mine. "I don't know what it is about you, but you drive men crazy with how much we want you. I know if you were mine, I'd never want to let you go." He squeezed my hand. "Even now, I don't want to." William laughed shakily as his eyes bored into mine. "Probably a good thing you don't understand me. If I'd said that to any of the girls back home, they'd be buying a wedding dress that very day. Maybe it's because I've never seen you in a dress. I wonder if I ever will." The wind swept away his laughter as he led me to the mess deck for breakfast.

I clasped his hand tightly in both of mine, shaken at the message in his eyes that he'd reinforced with words I'd understood. If this ship sank, I'd fight off sharks to see him safely to land. William wouldn't suffer Giuseppe's fate. "No let go," I murmured, but I doubt he heard.

Ten

I swallowed the last bite of my sandwich and tried not to wish for food from home. Shipboard life was as dull as the food – I moved from cabin to mess and back again, seeing little else aside from glimpses of water and sky. It seemed almost too much effort to get up for more of the same.

A hand grabbed mine and yanked my arm, almost tipping me off the bench. William was instantly on his feet, his larger hand fastened over the skinny, offending wrist. "Let go of her, lad."

"I have a surprise for her, Mr McGregor," Charlie said. "Come on, you have to come out on deck." He jerked his head toward the door. "I want to show you something."

"I'm sure it can wait a couple of minutes so Maria can finish her meal. Have you eaten yet?" William released Charlie, but he didn't leave my side.

Charlie marched up to the counter and grabbed a sandwich in each hand. "I'll eat on deck," he insisted. "Come on. I don't want you to miss it." His eyes beseeched me.

I smiled and rose. Charlie grinned so widely, I thought his face would split. I followed him up to the bow, where the ship endlessly parted the waves.

"Have you ever seen anything like it, miss?" he asked, staring avidly at the bow wave, where the sunlight created rainbows in the spray.

I placed both hands on the rail and followed his gaze. A fin...no, more than one. A dolphin burst from the bow wave and flipped in the air, circling until it splashed back into the water. Two fins rose up in its place. I couldn't help laughing for joy. I'd never seen spinner dolphins from such a high vantage point before. I leaned over the rail, trying to count the swimming bodies keeping pace with the ship, but there were too many of them. More than a hundred. A pod this large could only be congregating for a reason. I peered into the depths, then lifted my eyes to the ocean in front of the ship. Did the sun catch on something, or was I imagining it?

"Careful, lass, or you'll find out how cold the Indian Ocean is in winter. As will I, for I'll dive in after you to fish you out again," William's voice said in my ear as he curled an arm around my waist.

"Aww, Mr McGregor, Maria's safe with me!" Charlie complained, aiming a bitter look at my protector. "I can protect her. I'm not afraid of a fight!"

"I'm sure you're right, lad, but she's my responsibility. And I wanted to see what could make her smile so brightly. Have you ever seen a dolphin before, Maria?"

"I know I've never seen so many. There must be at least ten of them!" Charlie insisted.

I shook my head, pointing. "More. Fish."

William laughed gently. "They're not fish, lass. They're dolphins – as warm-blooded as you or me."

Frustrated at not knowing the words, I shook my head harder. "No. Fish!"

As if to illustrate the point I'd failed to make, a cloud of flying fish rose from the water, followed by a dozen dolphins and a second, smaller wave of the marine mammals. A much-reduced cloud splashed down half a minute later.

Charlie burst out laughing. "She was right. The dolphins are fishing for flying fish. Was that how you survived on the raft? Did dolphins help you?"

William snorted. "They're just animals. The stories about them helping shipwrecked sailors are just that – stories."

"I heard that there are some places in the world where dolphins and fishermen work together to catch fish. Mr Kaito said..."

"Ohhh...no more fish," I said, pointing as the huge pod of spinner dolphins veered away from the ship. A younger one stayed with the bow wave for a little longer, turning in dizzying circles until it realised it was alone. It launched itself into the air in the wake of the rest of its community.

I watched the dolphins leaping and swimming off into the distance and I yearned for that kind of freedom. Today, sun glinted off the waves for the first time since I'd boarded this ship and it looked so pretty. The ocean matched William's eyes again, I decided, glancing from one to the other.

Something warm and clammy closed over my fingers, pressing them against the railing. Charlie's hand. He stared in the direction of the dolphins, his body stiffened by the same nervous energy that had made his palms sweaty. I realised that the boy cherished romantic or at least lustful hopes for me – something my broken heart could never return. I leaned closer and kissed Charlie's cheek, feeling William's arm tighten around me. "Thank you, Charlie."

Charlie turned pink. "Y-you're welcome, mmm-Miss Maria," he managed to say.

A whistle sounded behind us. "It just keeps getting better and better! The girl with the big tits is a whore who does two at the same time. What d'you say, Barrett? Fancy a tumble with this one? Seeing as we saved her life, the first time should be free."

Charlie jumped away from me. "She's not a...how dare you say that about..." he spluttered.

With William close behind me, we turned together, but he dropped his arm so that he no longer held me.

Two men stood on the deck – Barrett and Sciarra – and both leered at me with unmistakeable lust. Lust they wouldn't slake anywhere near me, I swore. Rage rose up inside me – far hotter than the anger that turned Charlie's face red. The day either of these men touched me would be the day they died. And I wanted that to be today.

I took a step toward them before William grabbed me, both arms cinching around my waist. "No, lass, that's what they want. They want to hurt you."

I wasn't sure that I could take out the unpleasant men without harming William or Charlie – and William knew his people and these men better than I did. I let him restrain me for a moment. A slight delay didn't matter – after all, these men were trapped on this ship with me until we made port. I had plenty of time.

"Apologise to the lady," William demanded. "Or I'll see that you regret it."

"That's a whore. No lady," Barrett spat.

"The next time you spit, I promise you it'll be blood and your own teeth, you rude bastard son of a whore." William replied before lowering his voice to add, "Beg pardon, Maria."

"You might be able to take him, McGregor, but you're no match for me. I'll wager a night with your whore on the fight. You win, you keep her. I win, I get her all to myself." Sciarra's grin glittered with malice.

William's arms tightened around my waist. "I've never lost a fight. By the time I'm finished with you, you won't be able to talk at all, let alone insult ladies. Your own mother won't recognise your face when I'm done. When I've beaten both of you so you're lying on the deck, crying like little girls, you'll leave the lady alone."

"He fought off six of the Queen's men. They lived because one coward pulled a gun and shot him. You're the girl, McGregor, and the whore is ours."

Both William and Charlie burst out laughing, but it was Charlie who cried, "You mean the poxy whore queen of Sydney? Queen of the night or the underworld or whatever they call her? I heard it was six of her whores you fought, not men, and you pissed and shat yourself before she shot you for trying to sneak out without paying. Mr McGregor will pound you into the deck!"

"Tomorrow, after our shift ends," Sciarra said with a nod to Barrett. "And I'll be first, so while you're lying on the deck in a pool of your own blood and Barrett's kicking three kinds of shit out of you, I'll be fucking your little girlfriend."

The two men sauntered off toward the stern, the smoke from their cigarettes drifting up in their wake.

"You'll win, won't you, Mr McGregor? You can't let them hurt Maria. It's just not right..." Charlie said, turning desperate eyes toward William.

William released me and I spun so I could see his worried face. "Of course, lad. Now, I think I should get Maria below, before that cloudburst hits." He nodded toward the dark cloud bearing down on us. "Winter in the Indian Ocean. It makes me miss Scotland's storms."

Eleven

The following morning, William seemed intent on showing me how to move furniture. "While I'm gone, you keep this door shut and push the locker in front of it. Wedge it against the bunk like this if you can." He moved the locker so that it was jammed between the door and the bunk, trapping us inside. As afternoon approached, he seemed more and more worried and he stopped speaking. Instead, he balled his hands into fists and punched the air at an imaginary opponent – first on one side of him, then the other. After the verbal altercation yesterday, he seemed to be preparing for a fight with the two men. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

He didn't eat a bite at lunch. He just stared at me, grinding his teeth against each other in the absence of food, until I'd finished eating. Then, without saying a word, he took my arm and marched me back to our cabin.

"As soon as I'm gone, I want you to barricade this door. Don't let anyone in. Do you understand me?"

I looked into his worried eyes and nodded, hoping that was the response he required. I wished I understood.

This seemed to satisfy him. He leaned down and pressed his lips to my forehead. "Don't worry, lass. I won't lose and I'll be back. The crew will leave you alone after I deal with these two. Just don't let anyone in until I come back."

My forehead still felt warm from his touch as I watched him hurry out of the cabin, clanging the door shut behind him.

I looked at the locker on the floor by the door and sighed. I started hauling it back to its place beneath the porthole, wishing I knew why William had wanted me to imprison myself alone in this tiny room.

I gave the locker one last shove and heard frenzied hammering on the cabin door. The door flew open and Charlie burst in, breathless and flushed. "Miss! Maria! It's time. Come quickly!" He grabbed my arm and tugged.

Mystified, I allowed the excited boy to pull me down the corridor and up the ladder to the main deck.

"It's Mr McGregor! He's fighting for your honour, like some sort of knight in a fairy tale!" He led me to the stern, down another ladder to where crates and barrels were stacked.

I heard the rumble of voices and the smack of flesh on flesh before I saw them, but I knew what I'd find. William hadn't been dreading trouble – he'd made an appointment with it. We rounded a stack of barrels and I almost bumped into two men who were waving their fists in the air, urging someone on.

Charlie pushed and jumped, but he couldn't push through the milling crowd which looked like it consisted of the majority of the crew. He looked around and pointed. "The mast, miss. We'll have a good view from the mast. Do you think you can climb a rope ladder? I can help you if you want." He

hurried to the mast and gestured. "You go first, miss. I'll climb below you so I can catch you if you fall."

The tarred hemp was rough and sticky beneath my hands and feet, swaying in the stiff breeze, but I clambered up the rope ladder quickly, curling my toes around the beam at the top as I hugged the mast for support. I could see the combatants now and I couldn't tear my eyes away.

Stripped down to their trousers, both men circled each other in the clear patch of deck that was marked off by a rope draped around barrels and crates, creating a rough ring. The rest of the crew crowded around the rope fence, pumping their fists and shouting insults or encouragement – it was hard to tell which, or who it was directed at. The sound was angry and primal.

One man's fist cracked against the other's chin, followed by his other fist smashing the man's nose. Blood spurted, streaming down the man's face and onto his bare chest.

"Yeah, Mr McGregor! You show him what happens when you say bad things about Miss Maria!" Charlie hooted beside me.

Startled, William turned his head to stare at Charlie before his gaze shifted to me. I saw pain in his eyes and I felt responsible. No man should hurt for me when all he'd done was help me. He hadn't wanted me to see this.

"NO!" I gasped as the bloody-faced man took advantage of William's distraction to take a swing at him. William dodged, but the blow still landed, splitting his lip.

"Yeah, go, Barrett! Beat him good!" A single cheer rose up from a man with two black eyes – one of them swollen shut and bleeding. I recognised the man sitting in a puddle as Sciarra and my hands tightened on the mast, wishing I could wrap them around the man's throat.

I watched William wipe a trickle of blood from his chin as he advanced on Barrett. He delivered a series of jabs to the man's midsection and I heard the crack of breaking bone. Barrett stumbled back, but William pursued him, punching him in the face repeatedly. Barrett seemed to have trouble breathing, but somehow he remained on his feet. He said something I couldn't hear and spat in William's face. William's final blow smacked into the side of the man's head, spinning him around before Barrett collapsed on the deck. The crowd fell silent.

William pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face.

Someone grabbed Barrett's legs and dragged him out of the makeshift ring. I watched in satisfaction as someone splashed a bucket of seawater over his face to rouse him and he came up spluttering. Shoving the man with the bucket out of his way, Barrett stormed toward the bow, taking the rungs of the ladder two at a time.

William drank a cup of water and rinsed his mouth. He threw the cup down and held his arms out in an angry invitation, saying, "Who's next? Anyone else want to challenge me?"

A slim, black-haired man slipped under the rope to stand in the ring and I gasped as I recognised the polite green tea drinker. "I'll be your opponent."

Both men gave each other a short nod, as if accepting the other's challenge.

The surrounding crew seemed to think this was a signal to start arguing and exchanging pieces of paper. None of them looked happy.

"Betting on the outcome, miss. Mr McGregor's beaten every man he's ever fought, but so has Mr Kaito. No one's game to fight Mr Kaito, but sometimes they're brave enough to challenge Mr McGregor."

"You'll need to let go of your anger if you wish to beat me, MacuGuregoru-san," Kaito said with an eerie smile.

"Save your breath, Kaito," William replied, squaring up his fists for another bout. The crowd hushed.

The two men circled, throwing and dodging punches in a mesmerising dance. Without the blood or the blows, it was hard to believe the men were combatants. I could hear their bare feet shuffling against the boards, it was so quiet.

I held my breath. There was something about this dance that seemed far more dangerous than William's bout with Barrett. Perhaps it was the calm smile on Kaito's face.

Kaito's arm lifted, then jerked down in a chopping motion toward William's neck. To my surprise, William caught the blow with his forearm. Kaito's smile widened. I could barely keep track of the flurry of blows that followed, as both seemed to want to hit the other with the sides of their hand as well as closed fists, and each blocked the other by mirroring their attack.

They circled again, exchanging blows and blocks as the crowd started to murmur. Kaito lifted his leg to kick and I gasped as William blocked that, too. The dance intensified as the two men attacked one another with both arms and feet. I'd never seen anything like it and neither had the hushed crowd. Kaito caught William's kick in his hands and both men spun apart. William was panting, but he didn't take his eyes off his opponent.

"Showing off for the lady. What will happen to her if you're defeated, MacuGuregoru-san?"

William charged at Kaito and the fight began again. This time, William landed first one blow, then another, on the other man's ribs, but Kaito delivered a crunching kick to William's diaphragm that evened the score. While William wheezed for breath, Kaito tenderly touched what I hoped were broken ribs. As if he'd read my thoughts, the Japanese man lifted his gaze to me.

"What is the girl thinking as she watches her protector lose to his own anger, MacuGuregoru-san?" he said softly.

"No," I whispered as William charged Kaito again. Kaito somehow flipped William from his feet to his back, so William lay gasping on the deck, still struggling to breathe.

The crowd seemed to be waiting for something before Kaito held his fist in the air and they cheered.

"Who will challenge me?" he called.

William clambered onto his hands and knees. "I'm not finished yet," he croaked. He crawled over to a barrel and used it to hoist himself to his feet. "I won't lose to you, you cold bastard." He lifted his

arms into a fighting stance, but it looked like one breath would tip him over again.

"You have courage, MacuGuregoru-san, but you should surrender now. It is no dishonour among your people."

Kaito's tight smile set me on edge. I didn't understand his words, but it sounded like sneering to me – a deliberate taunt to make William attack him and face more pain and humiliation. I would not permit it.

Balancing on the balls of my feet, I leaped from my high perch, feeling the rush of air as I dropped toward the deck. I tucked my body into a ball just before I hit, rolling with the impact so that I could jump to my feet between them. I'd judged the distance almost perfectly – I could feel the heat of William's panting breath on my neck as I saw the fear in Kaito's eyes.

William's arm closed around my waist as he tried to pull me back. "A boxing ring is no place for a lady, Maria. You shouldn't be here. Too...dangerous."

Kaito stepped back cautiously, his eyes never leaving mine. "Among my people, there are stories of women samurai, MacuGuregoru-san – warriors who all men feared. This one may have the soul of such a warrior."

He feinted at me and I dodged, shaking free of William's restraining arms. I might not have their experience in inflicting violence, but that didn't make me helpless.

The next blow he aimed was no feint, but it didn't connect, either. He moved and I darted away, the tiniest twinge of his muscles telling me which way to go. He started slow, but my smile only widened as I turned, ducked, dodged and stepped out of his reach. Blows rained harder and faster, but I kept up, twisting my body as I danced away from the man. I was lighter on my feet and it showed – I was always a step ahead of him.

I saw a twitch in his thigh as he aimed a kick at me and I leaped, twisting in mid-air to avoid a well-placed fist as his leg swept beneath me. As our dance picked up the tempo, I couldn't wipe the smile from my face – even in my cumbersome clothing, I'd never felt so free. Wanting to see how he'd floored William so quickly, I advanced on him as if I wished to attack.

His eyes flashed in triumph as he seized my lapel with one hand and the waistband of my pants with the other. His foot hooked behind my knee, pulling me toward him, and I tipped back, lowered to the deck by his grip on my clothing. The moment he released me, I rolled, rising to my feet.

"McGregor! I said if there was any more fighting on my ship I'd drop the culprit overboard. I don't care if you're a paying passenger and my wife's cousin, by God I'll send you off in a lifeboat with naught but yourself for company if I find you fighting again." The crowd eddied aside, as if a strong rip pulled everything out of its path.

Kaito's attention was riveted on the shouting captain's approach, along with everyone else.

"McGregor! Do you want the girl to think we're a pack of savages, beating the daylights out of each other until they fall to the deck?"

I swallowed and tried to remember the sequence. Shoulder, hip, hook, pull...oh, my. Kaito smacked to the deck, looking shocked as he stared up at me. I burst out laughing.

"What the deuce is going on here?" Captain Foster demanded.

William coughed. "It started as a friendly competition, captain. A few men challenged me to a boxing match and we placed some small wagers. Others came to watch and I won the first few bouts, before Kaito beat me to become the next champion."

"An amateur boxing match is hardly the place for a woman, McGregor." Captain Foster glanced at me, then glared back at William.

William looked like he was trying not to laugh. "So I said to her, captain. Only Maria...I don't think she agreed with me. Then she...she dropped Kaito here to the deck." He offered his arm to the man and Kaito took it, rising to his feet.

Now all eyes were on me.

"This girl beat a man in a boxing ring?" Captain Foster's voice dripped with the disbelief reflected in his wide eyes. I lifted my chin to meet his gaze. I didn't fear this man, but I began to believe that he feared me more than a little.

Both William and Kaito nodded. "It seems she knows a bit of his Eastern hand-to-hand fighting, too."

Captain Foster didn't seem to know what to do. Turning away from me, his shoulders sagged. "I want everyone to get back on duty. And you, McGregor – get her out of my sight. If the shipowners knew I'd let a woman get into a boxing match with the crew...they'd be outraged. Take her below – looks like we have another storm coming in."

William grabbed his shirt off the top of the crate and curled an arm around my shoulders. "Better do what he says, lass. You don't want to be stuck in a lifeboat on your lonesome again, I'm sure."

Twelve

William slammed the door behind us and threw his shirt on his bunk. "What were you thinking? Why didn't you stay here like I told you to?" he demanded, lifting the bucket of water onto the locker. He cupped some water in his hands and splashed it on his face before he dumped the remainder over his head, sending water everywhere – even on me, on the other side of the tiny cabin. A puddle started to form on the deck by his feet. "A fight is no place for a woman. You could have been...ungh!" His words faded into agonised sounds as he gingerly fingered his ribs. Bruises were already forming beneath the skin and I feared the bones were broken.

He dropped to his knees and rummaged through the locker. Pulling out a roll of cloth, he held it out to me. "Here. All women know how to bandage, don't they? Natural-born nurses and all."

I took the roll and examined it. It was barely bigger than my fist – a rolled strip perhaps as wide as my wrist. I stared at the man who now stood before me. He looked expectant, but I lifted my shoulders in a shrug. I had no idea what he wanted me to do.

He made an exasperated sound and snatched the cloth back. William proceeded to unroll the fabric, wrapping it around his chest repeatedly, grimacing in pain as the poorly-applied bandage slipped down his torso.

Realisation dawned. He wanted me to bind his broken ribs. "William," I said, reaching out to touch him. The bandage slipped from his fingers and slid down to his waist. I smiled as I unwound it. First, I needed to check where he was injured – if I put too much pressure on a different injury to support his ribs, I could do further damage.

I touched my fingers to the darkest bruising.

"Hey! That hurts!" he complained, shrinking away from my touch.

Holding my hand over his injury, I repeated, "Hurts?" I shifted my hand to his stomach, which appeared undamaged. "No hurts?" For what felt like the hundredth time, I wished I knew the words to ask him for what I needed. I wanted to be able to say, "Tell me what hurts, you great big baby, so I know what to tend first."

William sighed and pointed to his bruise. "This hurts." He gestured at his cheek, where his angry scrubbing had reopened the cut on his lip. "This." He held up his hands, so that I could see where the skin had split across his reddened knuckles. "These, too."

I nodded, but it was his ribs that I focussed on. Broken or just bruised? Kaito had kicked him hard, but surely not hard enough to break bone, nor had William crashed into anything afterwards. Avoiding the dark discolouration, I probed the hard muscle around it. His skin was hot and moist beneath my fingers, but he didn't flinch the way he had before. Trying to be as light as possible, I touched the bruising again, following the line of his ribs to ascertain if there really was a fracture. No – they seemed intact.

"No broke. Hurt, no broke," I announced, biting the unravelled cloth to tear it into two pieces. I took his hand in mine and bound his fingers in the length of cloth, tying it at the end to secure it. I did

the same with his other hand. "No hurt," I assured him, smiling.

His lips lifted a little and blood trickled from the cut. I had no cloth left, but I knew where he kept his handkerchief. I slipped my fingers into his pants pocket, feeling for the folded square of fabric. Through the thin pocket lining, I could feel more hot, hard muscle beneath, but I'd also found the bunched-up handkerchief, so I withdrew my hand and dabbed at his lip. William took the handkerchief from me and did his own dabbing, looking conflicted.

"You shouldn't go rifling through a man's pockets like that. You might find things a lady like yourself shouldn't...oughtn't..." He stopped as if searching for the words to continue while his face grew red with embarrassment. This seemed to fuel some fire within him. "What were you thinking? Jumping from the mast into a ring of fighting men. You could have been killed. You could have been hurt. One of them might have attacked you – I might have attacked you. Kaito did. Did he hit you – hurt you?" Anger turned to panic. "Are you hurt?" He framed my face in his hands, his eyes boring into mine.

I shook my head. I might not understand all of his words, but his body and his voice spoke volumes to me. While his voice was angry, his eyes were concerned, with the edge of panic that permeated his words at the end. Not to mention the tender way his hands held me now. My wellbeing mattered to him. I mattered to him. A smile lifted my lips as I said, "No, William. No hurt."

"Good," he murmured, pressing his lips to mine. His warm kiss swept me away on a thrilling wave that bubbled through my body like sea-foam. His tongue surged into my mouth and I tightened my arms around his neck, though I couldn't recall how they'd found their way to what felt like the most natural place for them to be.

"Oh, William," I sighed when we paused for breath. My lips tingled from his kisses and the bristly hair on his upper lip and chin. His fingers combed through my hair as I rested my head against his. I never wanted to let him go.

The bell-like clanging of someone hitting the door startled me. William gently disengaged from me as the door swung open and Charlie staggered inside, holding a bottle in one hand. "Mr Allchin bet against you in the fight. He lost so much money that he offered me rum instead. I took it and I thought I should share it with you and Maria, seeing as you two won me the bottle...hic!" He wove through the tiny cabin until he bumped against the wall and stood there with a bemused smile on his face.

William took the bottle from his hand. "You should eat something before you drink too much more of that, boy. How about we leave it here and go see what we can find in the mess." He set the bottle down and ushered both of us out of the cabin.

The mess deck was half-full, but all conversation died when we entered. No one seemed willing to meet my eyes – they were all very intent on the unappetising food. William noticed my unease and all three of us finished our food in record time, not lingering to talk.

When we returned to our cabin, William pulled me aside as Charlie went in. "You should head up to your bunk. Out of reach – just to be safe," William whispered to me, indicating that I should ascend. A glance at Charlie, who was clumsily swigging from the rum bottle, told me the boy wasn't entirely in control of his body any more, so I clambered up the ladder and sat cross-legged on my bunk. My head almost brushed the low ceiling.

Charlie held out the bottle. "To old-fashioned chivalry and lovely ladies!" he shouted, lifting the bottle to his lips. He stopped drinking abruptly and started coughing, then wiped his mouth and handed the bottle to William.

"I'll drink to the lady," William said, taking a swig. He stared at the label. "That's not a bad bottle of rum. I bet Allchin was saving that. Maria, would you like a taste?" He lifted the rum and I stretched for it, snagging the bottle from his hand.

Both men stared at me as I brought the open mouth to my lips. The liquor had a strong smell that burned my nose and my throat, I found as I swallowed a large mouthful of the stuff. Cautiously, I took another, smaller sip, but it was no less fiery. If anything, it stoked the flames in my throat even higher. I held the bottle out to the men – I wasn't sure I wanted any more.

Someone took it from me – I didn't notice who, as I was preoccupied with the effect the drink had on my body. The burning sensation spread from my throat outwards, diffusing into a warm, pleasant buzz. I gasped, focussing purely on the feeling. The only time I'd ever felt anything like this was in Giuseppe's arms – or when I'd kissed William though the bottled warmth was far inferior to both of these. It was like comparing my raft to this ship. No comparison at all, really.

After several minutes, I became accustomed to the rum's effects and I thought about tasting it once more. I crept forward, my legs sliding off the edge of the bunk. I looked down – I could easily jump the distance to the floor.

A warm hand closed around my ankle. "You have bee...be-yooful legs, Miss M'ria," Charlie slurred, stroking my foot with one hand as he took a deep draught from the bottle with the other.

I laughed, tugging my foot from his grasp as I seized the rum. I tipped the bottle up and drank until someone ripped it from my hands.

"That's enough for you, lass. Hard liquor's not something you should drink too much of." Angrily, I reached for the bottle William held, but he turned away, swallowing the rest. He held the bottle upside down. Not a drop fell from it – he'd emptied it.

I heard a groan and peered down. Charlie was crawling toward the door. He fell face-first into the tin bucket an instant before he vomited explosively and the bucket caught it.

William grasped my still-reaching hand as he set the empty bottle on the locker. "That's what happens when you drink too much. The only cure for it is time." He strode over to Charlie and hauled the boy to his feet. Thrusting the bucket into the boy's hands, he said, "Time to go back to your own cabin to sleep it off, lad. Thank you for sharing your winnings. You'll wish you hadn't won them in the morning, but you'll have to learn some time." He half carried, half dragged the boy into the

passage and closed the door. I heard Charlie throw up again before his shuffling steps faded down the corridor.

The liquor in my stomach seemed to ignite, making me see stars. I wanted to kiss William again before the stars faded and maybe more, besides. I swung my legs over the edge of the bunk and jumped. I landed on my feet, but there was something wrong with my head and I seemed to have lost most of the coordination in the rest of my body. I staggered and William caught me. "Easy, lass. You're drunk. I hope you can hold your liquor better than Charlie, for he took the bucket."

I pressed my hands to his cheeks and sucked in a deep breath, my vision blurring as I tried to focus on his lips. Clumsily, I managed to touch my lips to his and memory took control. Or perhaps it was passion. For a moment, he resisted, but the rum seemed to have burned away all resistance and some of the communication barriers between us, too.

Feeling like it was on fire, my body melted in his arms, moulding around his so that we fit together perfectly. Our tongues danced in the fighting ring formed by our lips, but this was different. A desire to feel him on his back beneath me crept into my thoughts and I pushed him toward the bunks, struggling to remember Kaito's moves. Shoulder, waist...yes! William landed on his bunk and I sat astride him, still kissing him with every ounce of my being.

William. I wanted William. I wanted to be as close to him as I could be. To feel his skin against mine as our passion drove us to greater heights. To love him as I'd loved Giuseppe.

Giuseppe.

I drew a sobbing breath as tears cascaded down my cheeks.

William sat up, manoeuvring my body so I sat across his lap, my legs dangling side by side over the edge of the mattress. Firm arms cradled me to his chest as I cried. "It's all right, lass. It was only a stupid wager – I'd never have let anyone hurt you and your honour is safe with me. Even drunk, I could never take advantage of you. You're worth more than that. One day, you'll make the next man you choose to marry very happy. Here, you just hold on to me until you feel better."

I cuddled up to him, revelling in the bliss his arms held, and wondered how I could ever want anyone else but William.

Thirteen

I squinted up at the ceiling, unable to remember how it had acquired stripes.

Sitting up, I scanned my surroundings. The cabin looked the same, but I was lying in William's bunk and not my own. I'd slept in my rumpled clothes. Ugh. I swore never to do it again – not while I was capable of undressing myself to sleep without them.

William. Where was William?

The door swung silently inwards and I moved into a crouch, ready to spring if my visitor proved a threat.

"Good morning, lass. I brought you some water to wash with – I figured you'd want more privacy than the sailors' washroom. How are you feeling this morning?" William offered his hand and I accepted his help to stand up.

I yelped and wished I hadn't – it felt like another fight had started inside my head and the combatants were trying to beat their way out through my forehead. I pressed my hands to my head and was shocked to discover that it wasn't bulging in the slightest. I whimpered at the pain, just wanting it to stop.

"After that much rum last night, I'm not surprised your head hurts. It does, right?"

I nodded and winced as that made the pain worse. "Hurts," I whispered.

William crouched on the floor beside the bed. "Then you're lucky I know where they keep the medical kit on this boat. The aspirin's gone, but I found something called Aspro that looks like it does the same thing. Here, have you taken pills before?"

I stared at the small, round tablets in his hand, then lifted my eyes to his face. I had no idea what he expected me to do with them.

He smiled. "Good thing I brought a few spare. Right, you put them on your tongue like this." He placed a tablet on his extended tongue, then pulled his tongue back into his mouth. "Take a drink and swallow it down, but don't bite it." He took a mouthful of water and swallowed, then stuck out his bare tongue. "See? Gone. Two should see to your hangover." He pressed two of the tablets into my hand, holding out the cup of water. "Go on."

I stuck my tongue out and laid the pills on it. The taste was unpleasant and they were as dry as bone. I drank some of the water, which filled my mouth with the nauseating taste that remained even after I'd swallowed the tablets. I finished off the cup and hoped the whole ordeal would be worth it. Anything to rid myself of the pounding inside my head.

William pointed at his pillow. "Rest. They take a little while to work."

I reclined slowly, relieved when the pain lessened as my head hit the pillow. I turned to watch William, hoping he might be able to distract me from my hurting head. He'd removed his shirt and I could see the pale lines of scars on the smooth skin of his back. They looked too straight to be from Portuguese man-o'-war tentacles, as mine were. Perhaps he had different jellyfish in the waters near his home.

He wrapped his fingers around a brush, rotating it into the palm of his other hand until the bristles were covered in creamy foam. To my fascination, he smoothed this foam across his cheeks and his chin. He even spread a thin layer on his upper lip before frothing up a handful more of the stuff to coat his throat. Once he'd carefully rinsed and dried his hands, he unfolded a blade and began sharpening it. The silvery metal glinted in the morning sunlight streaming through the porthole as I wondered why he needed such a sharp edge. Perhaps I should have felt a premonition of danger, but the blade in William's hands held no fear for me.

"This was my grandfather's," he said, rubbing his thumb across the cream-coloured handle. "Back home, I had one of those modern safety razors, but I had no idea if we could get the blades out here, so I was allowed to take my grandfather's old cut-throat razor. My father never used it – he said a beard was a man's defence against the freezing north wind. My mother said it was a defence against women – if no other woman could find his mouth to kiss, then he was hers forever."

I watched in alarm as he scraped the blade down his own cheek, much like I might have scaled a fish. His careful stroke removed the foam, but his skin beneath it appeared intact. Successive strokes cleared his skin of most of the creamy lather, until he reached his chin. "Did you never watch your father shave? Or your husband?"

I stared, mute, as he continued.

He squinted at a small circle of glass he'd propped up on the locker, puckered his face and cautiously ran the edge of the blade down his chin. He pulled comical faces, pulling the skin this way and that as he scraped the soap away, pausing every few strokes to rinse the blade. When there were only faint lines of foam left and a blob that had somehow adhered to his ear, he splashed water on his face and towelled himself dry.

He lifted the bowl of water, its surface now swimming with the scum of what had once been the lather on his face, and tipped it out the porthole before he turned to face me. I gasped at the transformation.

Gone was the stubble at his throat, the neatly trimmed beard on his chin and the bristly moustache that had adorned his upper lip. His face looked as smooth as mine and I wanted to touch him. I wanted to know what it felt like to kiss him without the tangle of facial hair he'd worn since the day we'd met.

As William buttoned up his shirt, he said, "When we reach shore, I'll help you find your family so you can go home, where you'll be safe."

I shook my head. "No family. No home. No...more."

William dropped to his knees beside me. "No family left at all? No home? Maria..."

I looked into his horrified eyes and nodded slowly.

Without warning, he gathered me in his arms, pulling me up so that I faced him. Only a breath separated our lips and his eyes drew me deep inside. "I will find a home for you. I swear it. I'll even

build one for you with my own hands, if that's what it takes to keep you safe. I'll make a home for you...with you...if that's what you want."

I yielded to the yearning in his eyes, as they reflected the urge in my own heart. I took his head in my hands and kissed him, his tongue gliding around mine as if he wished to hold me inside as well as out.

The door clanged open and we sprang apart. Charlie stood in the doorway, glowering as he held the frame for support. His hair and his shirt were drenched as if someone had poured a whole bucket of water over them. "I hate rum. I'm never drinking alcohol again." His bloodshot eyes turned pleadingly to me. "Tell me Miss Maria didn't see me in that state."

William eyed him. "Sorry, lad, but she saw everything. I had to turn you out for your own good – and her safety."

Charlie groaned and staggered up the passage, swearing until he was well out of sight and all I could hear of him were his mumbled curses.

"Tidy yourself up, lass, so I can take you to breakfast. I have a surprise for you." William poured clean water into the bowl and offered it to me. I inclined my head in thanks and rolled up my sleeves so I could wash. The whole ocean couldn't wash away the feeling of his mouth on mine and I didn't want it to.

Fourteen

William's cheeky grin persisted as he led me to the mess deck, which was the scene of unusual activity. Men unrolled lengths of the paper that I'd seen wired to the toilet wall, and painted it red before fastening it to the bulkheads. The stuff hung in swags from the pin points, along the wall and across the ceiling as one man started pinning it to the ceiling beams.

"Interesting decorations," William said, laughing.

One man sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand, leaving a streak of red paint across his cheek. "Yeah, well we wouldn't have any if it weren't for the Indian boys. No one can find the ones we used for Captain Foster's birthday, so Chief Officer Smith gets ruddy bog-roll instead." He turned to the other men. "Oi, Ali!" Three men responded to his call. "Mr McGregor likes your idea." All three grinned, waved and returned to their work.

William and I carefully made our way through the hall, avoiding the draped, dripping toilet paper. None of the breakfast foods looked particularly appetising and the tea was extra murky this morning, but I tried to choke it down anyway as William seemed set on explaining the occasion to me.

"It's the chief officer's birthday, so we'll be having cake for pudding tonight and the captain has promised he'll get the gramophone out. Smith has an impressive record collection and he picked up some jazz ones in New York that he seemed pretty excited about. He's a big fan of Cole Porter, so I'm sure you'll hear heaps of him tonight. And...speaking of music..." He coughed, looking uncomfortable. "I was wondering if you might be willing...if you'd agree to...if you'd like to...do you know how to dance, Maria?"

"Dance?" I tasted the word, knowing its meaning. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd watched the islanders back home dance at some celebration or other, wishing I could join in, but knowing I could never. The intricate patterns as people spun around each other in matching movements. I'd practiced the steps alone in the dark as the faint strains of the music carried to me across the waves and sand.

"Would you...would you dance with me?" he asked, his voice failing so that he had to clear his throat. "Please?"

Nervously, I wiped my mouth. A small school of frightened fish seemed to have swum into my stomach, it felt so fluttery. For the first time, not to dance alone, in the dark? "Yes, William," I breathed, unable to contain my beaming smile.

"Right now?" he continued, reaching for my hand. Confused, I let him lead me away from the table and out into the watery sunlight at the bow. Didn't we need music? The only sounds were the thrumming of the engines and the sibilance of the waves as they splashed and slid along the hull. He backed away from me a little, placed his hands on his hips, and bowed from the waist. Hurriedly, I did the same.

William grinned at me and raised his hands above his head, clapping to a beat only he could hear. Yet my memory stirred as if I could still hear the faint fiddle floating on the wind. I counted eight

before I stretched my toes out to take the first sliding step of a reel I'd only ever danced alone. I lifted my arms above my head, desperately hoping I'd remember the steps as I finished a circuit around William and back to where I'd started. His feet hadn't moved, but he looked astonished. I stopped, looking down at my feet. I'd surely committed some societal faux pas that I didn't understand.

"Maria, where did you learn to dance a reel? Please, let me dance with you," he said eagerly, angling his body like the couples had at home. I matched him, mirroring his motion with each step, tap and turn. I measured my steps carefully, knowing how precise they had to be. Though I should have expected it, when William linked his arm with mine and whirled me around, he left me momentarily breathless. I recovered quickly and remembered the rest of the steps until he touched me again. I laughed aloud for the joy of it – the first time I'd danced with someone else.

The reel ended and he stopped clapping as we both bowed. Still bent over, I gasped when William grasped my shoulders to haul me upright, before he planted a smacking kiss on my lips. "You're better than my sister, Sarah! Where did you learn to dance like that?"

I swallowed, wanting to him to kiss me again instead of asking questions I didn't want to answer. "Home," I responded sadly.

William curled an arm around my shoulder and stared at the ocean over the starboard railing. "One day, I'd like to take you to my home. You can meet Sarah and her husband, my brothers and their wives, too. I'd wrap you in thick McGregor tartan so you wouldn't feel the cold. Maria, if you let me, I'd take care of you, all your days, in any home you wish." The look in his eyes was one of longing. One I felt I understood – better than his words, at least.

Cautiously, I placed my hands on his cheeks and lifted my lips to his. The kiss we shared was gentle and it seemed to calm his restlessness. He held tight to me as we stared out over the ocean together. My feet tingled to dance some more, but for now I was content in his arms.

Fifteen

"I'll be right back, lass. Just going to the washroom to make myself look good enough to be seen with you tonight." William winked and closed the door behind him.

Alone in the cabin, I dropped my borrowed pants. The islander girls wore skirts when they danced and I intended to do the same. I stripped the sheet from my bed and checked its width against my legs. Too long, I decided, folding it in half before wrapping it around my waist. I tucked in the top corner, much as the sarong-clad islander girls did, and twisted around, trying to see if it hung straight at the back. I glimpsed someone standing behind me and lifted my eyes to meet William's.

He closed his mouth and shut the door behind him. "You look beautiful," he said. William crossed the cabin so that he was close enough to kiss, but he stood back. "Can I suggest one thing? You should...you should untie your hair. I'm sure one night won't summon disaster. Please?" He caressed my neck, then pulled my braid until the ribbon on the end lay in his fingers. He pulled it off, weaving his fingers through the strands to loosen the braid.

I held my breath, wanting him to continue. Last time he'd used the comb, though, and that was still in my pants pocket. I moved away from him to retrieve it, then held the tortoiseshell comb out to him. "Pl...please?" I asked carefully.

"How can I refuse, when you ask so politely?" His arms circled me, pulling me over to his bunk. We sat so close I could feel the heat of his body behind me. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on his rhythmic strokes as he tamed my hair once more.

"You'll love it. I remember taking Sarah to Hogmanay in Glasgow for the first time. We were dancing what felt like the hundredth reel that night and a storm blew in. A gust of wind caught a fair few kilts up and Sarah screamed. It took me a while to get her to calm down enough to tell me what'd happened. Turns out the breeze had whipped some kilts so high she'd gotten her first glimpse of what a true Scotsman keeps underneath. She wouldn't speak to Angus at all that night – I think she was shocked. James had on a pair of tatty underpants and those caused more trouble than Angus' wedding tackle on display. I think that's the night she first kissed James, too. Ha, all the men made fun of him for wearing anything under his kilt, but Sarah thought he was the most civilised of all of us. It wasn't more'n a year later that she married him, true Scotsman or no." William chuckled and I felt his breath on my neck a moment before his lips touched my skin. "I'd ask you to be mine, right here and now, if I knew you understood what I was asking, Maria. What've you done to me? I've barely known you a week, but it feels like longer. You've bewitched me so I want no one else – and no future without you in it."

He fell silent and I turned to see the reason for it. His eyes filled with desire and I was no more immune to it than he was. I reached for him even as he reached for me, tangling together in a passionate kiss that stole my breath away. Yet, panting, I puckered up for more. I couldn't seem to get enough of this man and I wanted more.

"We must...must stop," he panted, holding my face in his hands as he pulled away. He seemed to find resistance as difficult as I did. "You look like an angel, Maria, all dressed in white with your gold halo of hair. I'd never forgive myself if I were responsible for the fall of such perfection. I swear, the day you become my wife there'll be no stopping us, but I can't have you until then." He smoothed my shirt down my sides, then paused to fix one of the shell buttons. "Perfect. Shall we go?" He rose and held out his hand. Together, we walked to the mess deck and my first proper party.

Sixteen

"Maria, you're a very graceful dancer," Captain Foster said as we circled for what felt like the hundredth time this evening. I merely smiled at his evident admiration. It was hard enough to remember the steps of something I'd never danced with others before, let alone with seven men who made mistakes, too.

I crossed the floor again to switch partners and was relieved to find I faced William. The musician fiddling let his last note die away and we bowed. All the men looked flushed and in need of a drink – and I was definitely feeling thirsty, too.

William led me over to a table where one of the stewards was pouring drinks and handed me a partially filled cup. The contents appeared to be a very light coloured tea, but a sniff told me it was as potent as the rum that had tried to make my head explode last night. I tried to hand it back, but William would have none of it. "A girl who can dance a Scottish reel as well as you deserves her dram of good Scottish whisky as much as any man here." The other men we'd danced with, who all held similar cups, laughed. He raised his cup and they followed suit. "To your health on your birthday, Smith!"

Six of them drank. The only man who stood as awkwardly as I did was the first officer – the man whose birthday it was. His eyes met mine and his drink shot into the air. "To the girl who dances like an angel!" All eyes turned to me and a blush crept across my cheeks.

To cover my embarrassment, I took a deep draught of my drink. And choked on what tasted like liquid coal-smoke.

"Are you all right, lass?" William asked, patting me on the back as I coughed. I managed to shake my head as I doubled over, trying to breathe through my seared throat. "Let's get you outside for some air."

He guided me to the main deck, where the strong wind tried to push us back into the passage. There was so much spray in the air that I tasted salt on my lips. I managed to drag in a lungful of air, then another. I counted five before I straightened again. The whole time, William's hand didn't leave my back – a warm, comforting pressure which reminded me that he cared for me. Even if, once again, he had tried to burn my insides with a drink no sane person should consume.

I heard a faint scratching sound, followed by very different music to the reel melodies we'd danced to. This had a loose feel to it, making it more relaxed. I closed my eyes, feeling the new rhythm.

"Better?" William whispered. His breath tickled my cheek as I nodded. "I missed my steps so many times tonight, for I couldn't take my eyes off you. Every time you were on another man's arm, I wanted to tear you away from him so you'd be mine alone. I want to take hold of you and never, ever let go, Maria. What have you done to me? I was lost at sea until I met you. Now I've found you, I'll cling to you like a barnacle to the hull. I won't be satisfied until you're all mine, lass, even if I have to learn whatever crazy colonial language you speak to make you understand. Please tell me I'm not imagining things and you feel the same. That your heart burns for me as much as mine loves you."

"Love," I rasped hoarsely. I knew the word and its meaning, or I thought I did. Love for someone tucked them safely in your heart for as long as they lived, then ripped your heart asunder when you lost them. I coughed and cleared my throat, trying to find my voice again in my whisky-burned insides.

"I'm so sorry, lass. I should get you another drink."

"Water," I whispered. "No whisky."

William laughed and I followed him back to the mess hall, hoping for a cup of soothing water. He made me sit on one of the benches, which had been pushed back along the wall to make room for the dancing, while he fetched me a cup of something from the steward. I sniffed the liquid experimentally but decided it was probably just water, so I downed it in three gulps. William hovered around me, his every muscle betraying an unusual urgency.

"Love," I began again.

William grasped my hands and moved to sit on the bench beside me. "Love," he said eagerly. "Tell me if you think there's any chance you can love me. I know you barely know me and I'm on my way to a job at the ends of the Earth, or so it feels like, but I have the means to take care of you. And I will."

I managed to smile, but he'd only made it harder for me to answer him. I barely knew the words to make myself understood as it was.

"Miss Maria! You have to come and dance to this one!" Charlie appeared in front of me, doubled over and panting. "If you dance the Charleston half as well as that strange Scottish fling thing, every man will envy me. Please dance with me."

William's grip on my hands tightened and his voice came out through gritted teeth. "Maria and I are having a private conversation. Go find someone else to dance with, lad."

"You can't keep her all to yourself, Mr McGregor," Charlie persisted. "She's the only woman here and she's not your wife. Maria has the right to dance with whoever she wants to, without your permission. Maria, will you please dance with me?" He held out his hand to me, his eyebrows pulled so low that they seemed to meet over the bridge of his nose.

"Lad, for the last time, leave us alone or..."

"McGregor. A word, please?" Captain Foster appeared, looking serious.

William looked desperately at me. "Look, captain, I promised I'd take care of Maria tonight. We were –"

"Charlie will take good care of her while you and I have a chat. I'm sure she'd only be bored, listening to talk about the mechanics of the ship. Go on, lad. Maria here is so light on her feet, you'll swear you're dancing with an angel. Don't step on her toes, mind." The captain pried my hands from William's and gestured at the open space where we'd danced earlier. "What girl doesn't love a chance to dance, right, Maria?"

Charlie grabbed my wrist and towed me away from William before I could protest. "He sounds like he's your dad or something. Trying to keep you away from me because I'm not good enough for you. I'm only an apprentice now, but I'll be fully qualified one day, with apprentices of my own. It's not like I'm asking for your hand in marriage. Not yet, anyway. Just a dance. Please, Maria." His eyes mirrored William's desperation.

I glanced around, but both William and Captain Foster had disappeared. I took a deep breath and summoned a smile for the sweet boy. "Yes, dance."

He seemed incredibly nervous as he stopped and faced me. I felt his arm inch across my back as his clammy hand fastened tightly over my fingers. He counted us in and promptly entered some sort of jerky fit, a grotesque parody of the reel I'd danced earlier with William. I glanced around, but no one seemed to find this unusual.

Charlie grinned. "It's the Charleston. You got to shake your arms and legs about, like this." He demonstrated, letting his arms and legs fly everywhere. A painful kick to my knee made me cry out and his flailing movements ceased as he buried me in a waterfall of apologies.

Seeing my way out of this confusing situation, I hobbled back to the bench with Charlie trailing behind me. After several seconds, I indicated that I would like a drink and he dashed to the now unmanned drinks table to procure two cups. He presented these to me with unnecessary ceremony, but I smiled and thanked him, all the same. A surreptitious sniff told me it wasn't water, so I carefully set it on the bench beside me. I'd had enough alcohol for one night, if not the next year.

Charlie tossed his back and I realised from his flushed cheeks that this wasn't his first drink of the evening. I fervently hoped he wouldn't be sick again. Perhaps he saw the pity in my eyes, or maybe he'd simply been summoning the courage to act, but the next moment his lips were crushed against mine and his tongue prodded my lips as if he thought I'd grant it entrance. I turned my head away and felt the damp muscle slide along my cheek to my ear. "What's wrong, Maria?" he said thickly. "Haven't you ever been kissed before? You're my first, too."

I leaned back and turned the full force of my pity on the poor boy. I needed to get these words out right so he'd understand. "I...love William." It came out as barely more than a whisper, but he reacted as if I'd shouted.

Rearing back, he stumbled away from me, hurt. "Maria," he whispered, then bolted out the door to the darkness.

Seventeen

Alone in a room full of people, I drew my knees up to the bench beside me and closed my eyes, listening to the music from the gramophone. I longed for William to return and hold me again, so I could tell him that he had a place in my otherwise empty heart. Sleepily, I sang along with the melody, so faint I could barely hear my own voice as I thought of William. Not knowing the song's words, I sang my own – calling him to return and claim me.

"Maria."

The unfamiliar voice made me jerk my eyes open. A forest of hands extended toward me as the assembled crew all asked the same thing – requesting that I dance with them.

No. This wasn't possible. They couldn't have heard me – how could they have known what I wanted, from the one man who wasn't among them? I jumped to my feet and shrugged off their pleas. William – where was William? I couldn't see past them to find him.

"No. NO!" I insisted, trying to push through them. I could see the door, but there were too many men in my way. I stumbled on anyway, shoving through them and stepping on my sarong skirt. My knee got caught in the fabric and I fell heavily to the deck. The men seemed to hesitate, before a clamour of voices rose again, offering to help me up. Every man's hands seemed to want to assist, like a million tentacles curling around my body. Between them, they lifted me to my feet, but the sarong had somehow come untied, so it slid to the deck and almost tripped me again as I struggled to escape their kind but misguided attention. I fought my way free from its folds and hurried to the exit. I wanted to scream at them to leave me alone and not touch me, but I didn't know the words.

I almost made it before a dark shadow barred my way. Two more hands grasped my shoulders and my tears of fury spilled over. "NO!" I cried, trying to push the man out of my way.

"What's wrong, Maria?" William asked gently, taking in my messy appearance. When his gaze reached my bare, bruised knees, his expression tightened. "What happened? Where is your skirt?"

Now the tears had started, I couldn't seem to turn them off. Faster they fell as I tried to pull out of his grasp so I could go hide in my cabin. I'd had enough revelry and dancing for one night – for all my nights.

"It's all right, lass," he said. I cried out in alarm as he swept me up in his arms. My feet grazed the bulkhead – the passage wasn't wide enough for this.

"McGregor," the captain began. I hadn't seen him standing in the shadows beside William. Had he witnessed my weakness, too? I struggled to be set on my own feet again.

Looking hurt, William gave me my freedom. "I swore I'd keep her safe and I won't break my promise. It's your ship and they're your crew – you sort them out. All I'm worried about is Maria."

Captain Foster sighed. "Take care of her, then, and find her some clothes. God only knows what happened this time and she surely won't tell us. Go on." He waved his hands in the direction of the sleep cabins.

Cautiously, I took William's hand. I took two steps toward our cabin, but he hadn't moved, letting my arm stretch out behind me. One more step and I'd have to let go. I didn't want to. "No hurt," I said slowly. "No more dance." I laid my cheek on the back of my hand, as I'd seen him do when he slept, and closed my eyes. "Rest."

Perhaps in the morning I'd have the courage to tell him the secrets of my heart.

Eighteen

I turned over in my narrow bunk, hoping to find some spot that was more comfortable, but it was no use. It wasn't the music I could still hear from the party in progress keeping me up, either. No matter how I lay, I still felt the grasping hands on my body, wanting more from me than I was willing to give. How had a ship full of sane men suddenly become one crewed by lust-crazed monsters? I wanted the comfort of William's arms around me to drive away the sensation of his shipmates' assault. Peering down at the bunk below me, I wondered if I could persuade him. His soft snores told me I'd have to wake him first, or slip into his arms as he slept and hope that would be enough.

The more I resisted the urge, the more I ached for him until I finally gave in and climbed down the ladder to the floor. I slipped beneath the blanket, cuddling up to his warm body, to find the man slept in a vest and some sort of short pants, instead of naked as I did. After a few minutes, his arms closed around me, just like I wanted, as he seemed to rouse. "Maria?" he murmured.

"Yes, William," I whispered back, pressing my body close against his. I could feel his arousal and I suddenly wanted that, too. A hot, passionate encounter to drive the day out of my mind. I slipped my hands into his shorts, stroking his hard length. I wanted him so badly – I'd never felt such longing for Giuseppe.

Forgive me, Giuseppe, but William is warm and here and you can never hold me in your arms again as you tell me you love me, I thought. And William, William...

William woke and I had no thoughts left for Giuseppe – only for the man beside me, who had ripped his clothing off. He stroked my breasts and belly so hard it seemed as if he wanted to leave bruises beneath his fingers. His hands dipped lower still, setting my thighs on fire as he caressed those, too, parting my legs. His fingers slipped inside me at the top of each stroke, trailing wetness down my inner thighs before stroking inside for more.

I moaned without words for the pleasure he gave me and how much more I craved. He seemed to understand exactly what I wanted. William's hands wrapped around my thighs, his fingers spreading my lower lips wide. He lifted me as he shifted so that I was poised above his hard head, wet and waiting. I tried to squirm down onto him, but all I managed to do was drive his fingers deeper. "Oh, yes," I moaned, wanting more. He slammed me down against him, as he drove up inside me.

"Oh God, Maria," he groaned, drowning out whatever sounds I made. Blissfully, I tried to hold tight to his hard heat inside of me, but he withdrew almost completely before he thrust deeply again. The harder I tried to hold onto him, the more molten my insides seemed to become until a volcanic burst of pleasure made me sob his name. I felt him chuckling, though he still filled me, as he said, "Oh, I can do better than that, lass. Hold tight." He seized my hips and ground me against him with each slow thrust, the steady rhythm building the heat hotter still.

"Oh, yes, yes, William...oh...OH!" When this stunning rush hit, he fastened his mouth on my bouncing breast, sucking so hard I thought he'd take the nipple off. He licked and kissed his way across my chest to the other nipple, suckling gently while I clenched him tightly between my legs.

Still shaking, I wanted more of the pleasure this man could give me and I started riding him, like a boat rides a wave. Flying over the crest, then slamming down into the trough, spreading my legs wider to drive him as deep inside me as he could go, my hips rocking as the heat built inside me so slowly I thought I'd scream before it released.

His mouth still wrapped around my breast, William grasped my hip with one hand, grinding me against him again as his other hand slipped between us. I was already full of him – what else did he think he could fit inside me? He pinched something between my lower lips, rubbing the swollen flesh hard between his fingers and I let out a wordless sob as the sensation overwhelmed me. I barely felt the sting of his teeth on my nipple as I screamed his name until I was hoarse.

William kissed me into silence as he flipped our bodies over so that he was on top and my head rested on his pillow. He plunged deep inside me again and I grasped his behind with shaking hands, wanting to push him deeper still. I spread my legs wider, lifting them to give him better access to all of me. He chuckled again and pulled my legs over his shoulders, thrusting so hard and deep I felt him hit a fleshy wall inside me. And again. And again...he pounded me endlessly, not stopping even when I breathlessly cried out his name as yet another rush of pleasure rocked me. Nor did I want him to stop. Ever. Feeling as if I'd explode if I came again, I was helpless to resist as William carried me to the crest before he slowed his pace as if he were teasing me. I clenched every muscle in my midsection, trying to hold on to him as he almost pulled out before plunging inside me again.

"You're close, aren't you, sweetheart? So am I. But ladies must come first. I insist..."

I moaned, arching my back up. His mouth covered mine, taking my voice, my tongue and muffling the scream that threatened to escape when he drove me to peak again. I was so close and I wasn't sure how my body would bear it. None of my time with Giuseppe had prepared me for this.

His fingers slipped between my lower lips again, pinching harder than ever, but he swallowed the sound of my squeal as he teased me closer and closer to the edge. A tortuously slow thrust made me gasp as his fingers circled, rubbing skin so sensitive it felt like my nerves were raw and he played them like the strings of the fiddle we'd danced to only hours before. When I thought only the tiniest movement would be enough to seal my fate, William pulled out of me entirely. I didn't have time to protest before he slammed back in, so hard, rough and fast that I was catapulted into my final, cataclysmic orgasm without warning. A scream ripped out of my throat, but his mouth on mine muffled the sound as I felt him burst inside me, a hot spurt that filled me completely.

He toppled over onto his side, his head hitting the pillow beside me. I tightened my limbs around him, wanting to savour the feeling of him inside me until he inevitably softened and slipped out. But for now, we were one, as we snuggled together into satisfied sleep.

Nineteen

Morning dawned and William's body was warm beside mine, though I felt empty without him inside me. The hard, hot length pressed against my thigh told me that he was ready for more action and the very thought of him had me aching in anticipation. I tipped us so that he lay on his back and I sat astride him, gasping as I guided him inside me. In the morning light, I saw how big the man was and spread my legs wider to take his whole length. No wonder I ached so much – but it was a sweet ache, that could only be soothed with more, equally hot sex. I slipped up and down his shaft, working my hips so that he slid against that sweet spot inside me with every stroke. He started to lift his hips to meet mine, driving him deeper inside me, and I squeezed him as he reached the peak of each thrust.

"Mmmm," William said as his hands closed around my breasts, which bounced as my body moved.

Like last night, I felt the slow build before my bubble burst, though it was nowhere near as powerful as the pleasure William could wring from my body when I was no longer in control. I longed to wake him properly so that we could do it all again. Perhaps I could rouse him with a little pleasure of my own...

I rode him harder, clenching my inner muscles in rhythm with the movement.

"Oh God, Maria," he groaned as I felt the triumph of his hot release inside me. For a moment, his dreamy smile matched my own as I looked down at him over my breasts. If only it could have lasted.

A loud crash sounded from somewhere above and we both jerked in shock. William's expression changed from bemused bliss to panic as he took in our intimately intertwined bodies. "Oh my God, Maria, we didn't. I thought it was a dream and then I woke up and you...oh God." He pushed me off him and stood, striding over to the water jug to splash some on his face and his nether regions. Keeping his back to me, he pulled on some clothes, muttering under his breath so that I couldn't discern the words.

I stood, too, dropped so quickly from bliss to rejection. A trickle of fluid tracked down my thigh, but I ignored it. I didn't understand. Last night, he'd enjoyed every moment and this morning, too, I'd thought until he'd pushed me away.

"Where in hell are your clothes? For God's sake, get dressed." He barely glanced at me before he left the cabin, slamming the door shut behind him.

Tears flowed down my cheeks as I climbed the ladder to retrieve my shirt and my pants. Following William's cold example, I splashed some water between my legs to cool the hot flesh where I'd held him so tightly, only minutes before, then poured a little down the breasts he'd tenderly cupped in his hands. I pulled my pants on and slipped the shirt over my head, not caring that my passion-hardened nipples were clearly outlined through the damp fabric. I tucked my comb into my pocket, wanting to ask William if he could comb my hair and braid it again for me, for it was still undone from last night. But first, I needed to find him.

Swiping the tears from my face, I strode out into the passage, intent on making him tell me what I'd done wrong. I had no idea how I'd manage to ask him, nor whether I'd understand his explanation, but I had to try. I didn't want to make the same mistake again – I wanted to share more nights like last night with him. Forget Giuseppe, for he was cold and dead – he could never touch me and heat my blood again. I wanted William, forever and always.

Someone grabbed my arm and something hard struck my face. I found myself lying on the deck, staring up at the blank bulkhead before a boot came into view. It kicked me in the head and everything faded to black.

Twenty

I awoke to darkness and the creaking of metal under strain. I woke to aching and pain, too, as I tenderly touched my bruised face, remembering the blows that had knocked me unconscious. How much time had passed?

In the lack of light, it was impossible to judge time, so I didn't. More important was where I'd been lying – somewhere below decks and below the waterline, too, if the bulkheads made so much noise. I shouted, listening to the echo of my voice to judge the size of my prison. The echo was decidedly hollow – placing me in one of the large cargo holds.

First, I had to find my way out. There were three possible exits – the hatch in the ceiling or the hatch in the wall that led to the lower deck, both of which were kept firmly closed most of the time, or through the hull – but that would sink the ship. The ceiling hatch was too high for me to reach – unless I stood on the shadowy cargo. Standing on the edge of the catwalk that ran along the side of the hold, I stretched my foot out toward the flat substance filling the hold almost to the level of the catwalk. My toes sank into what felt like wet beach sand until most of my foot was covered with the stuff. I wasn't sure how deep the hold went, but I didn't trust the mud that filled it to hold my weight. That ruled out the ceiling hatch.

With considerable difficulty, I pulled my foot free of the sucking mud and headed along the catwalk toward the door hatch. This one I could reach easily – it was a door, after all – but there was no way to open it. A piece of metal in the middle told me that there had once been a valve wheel attached to the door for precisely this purpose, but my jailer had removed it before imprisoning me here.

I hammered on the door, shouting until my sore throat stole my capacity for sound. Last night I'd screamed for joy as William made my body sing in ways I couldn't have imagined and today I paid the price – I didn't have a strong enough voice to scream for help. I pounded on the door for a few more seconds, but I received no response. That left only one means of escape – the one that could kill everyone else on board.

Padding along the catwalk in my bare feet, I scanned the bulkhead that I knew was the inner wall of the hull, searching for its weak points. I'd seen where shells had pierced the *Emden*'s hull, almost a decade ago, but the greatest damage had been where the hull plates met and the joins had come undone in the force of shell impacts. This vessel's plates were riveted together and the round rivets stood out in long rows, like regimented barnacles. There was one place that the rows weren't regular – a metal plate, perhaps half the size of the door, covered a section of bulkhead. Water seeped out from the bottom of the plate, creating a slow trickle into the slushy cargo. If I wanted a weak point, I'd found it – for the vessel had already sprung a slight leak here. All I'd need was something to pry the rivets from the panel and I could swim out of here, right up to the surface.

I searched the hold for some sort of pry bar that I could use and I found the next best thing – two shovels, attached to the catwalk with a length of rope, but the shovels themselves were partially

submerged in the ooze. I pulled them out and set to work, untying the water-swollen hemp. It felt like forever before I'd freed them, but I had little else to do.

Setting the edge of the shovel against the lowest rivet, I slowly leaned my weight on the handle. The rusty rivet snapped, increasing the trickle to a rivulet down the side of the ship. I examined the remaining rivets, which looked equally corroded. With my shovel, I'd make short work of this and then what? If I reached the surface, I'd still be climbing aboard a sinking ship in the middle of the ocean. At best, I could save William and some of the crew before she sank, but what if my imprisonment was at the captain's command with the crew's acquiescence? They'd take me prisoner once more on the lifeboat, in much closer quarters than here. Why had they locked me in here, anyway? Was it just one person, or the whole crew who'd locked me up?

I barely knew any of these men. Even William, who'd loved me one minute and rejected me the next. For the first time, I longed to be home. No matter how vicious the old women at home were, they'd never lock me up in the bowels of a ship. Instead, they'd banished me to the freedom of the outside world.

I sank to the floor, uncertainty overwhelming me. I was no longer a child – I knew the consequences of sinking a ship and killing those on board. A shipwreck had brought Giuseppe to my arms, too. William. I couldn't kill William. Not unless I knew for certain that he'd condemned me to this prison.

One thing I swore: the men who had would die.

Hefting the shovel once more, I drove it against the next rivet, which crumbled like old bread.

Clanking across the hold froze me, followed by a man's voice swearing. I gripped my shovel and stepped softly along the catwalk. My jailer had returned and the only one who would leave this hold alive was me.

Twenty-One

The furtive manner of the man who swung the door open told me more than any of his words. He was afraid of being discovered here. He wouldn't be so fearful if his actions were sanctioned by the rest of the crew. I smiled in the darkness. Today, he would die.

"I say it's bad luck to bring a woman aboard. Sciarra says it's the best kind of luck. Whores like you keep the men happy on a long voyage," a nasal voice said, followed by the clang of him pulling the hatch closed behind him. Closed but not locked, for the valve wheel was still missing. He clicked on a handheld light, a tube that directed a beam of light from one end, and pointed it at the catwalk. "I heard you scream for McGregor last night. Only whores make that much noise – normal girls just lie passive, waiting for the fucking to finish. So you can scream for me, too. Down here where no one, not even your precious McGregor, will hear you. If you make me happy, I might decide to keep you instead of throwing you overboard for the sharks."

Sharks I knew. I wished I had a school of them now, to feed his screaming body to.

The light beam swung closer to where I stood on the catwalk with my shovel raised. Three more steps, two, one...I swung my weapon with all my strength, but I'd misjudged the man's height and I hit his shoulder and not his head. He roared and backhanded me so that I crashed to the catwalk, my breath knocked from my lungs. The shovel flew out of my hands and into the ooze.

The man threw his weight on top of me, wrapping his arm around my neck and dragging me up by the throat. "You'll pay for that, whore." His arm tightened around my throat so that I could barely breathe.

My life would not end like this. Not on a raft in the middle of the ocean; not in bed without ever regaining consciousness; and not at the hands of this sterling example of human chivalry. I just had to work out how I intended to kill him. I wanted it to be slow and painful...and I wanted to watch. Sharks...I'd settle for just one of the beasts right now.

The bastard let go of my throat, hefting my body as if to throw me. I braced myself for the blow, for it was sure to hurt, and laughed as my body smacked into the cold mud. I looked up at the hatch above me and stretched out on the surface of the slurry. He'd made a deadly mistake that he wouldn't survive to regret.

A rough hand grasped my leg, dragging me back onto the catwalk, before a hand fastened on my hair. He dragged me along the metal before throwing me against the bulkhead beside the weeping panel.

A booted foot slammed into my ribs. "Ready to lie down and take it, whore?"

"No," I managed to say before he kicked me again. His hands tore at my pants, but the fabric was too thick to rip, so he swore some more. A smile sprang to my lips as I balled up a fist, socking him

right in the fork. Oh, it felt satisfying to cause him pain.

"Bitch!" He let go of me for a moment and I drew a deep, burning breath. He lunged for me again with murder in his eyes.

I rolled and grabbed the other shovel, raising it to hit him with it. He deflected the blow, so it clanged against the bulkhead instead. A rivet clattered to the catwalk. We fought for the shovel, both pinning it against the hull, and I felt it grind through one rivet and then another. The panel slid beneath me as water splashed my bare feet. I hadn't wanted to sink the ship, but this bastard had forced my hand. So be it.

I threw myself back into the inky mud, splaying out my limbs so I'd stay on the surface. The metal panel broke free, forced inward by the weight of the Indian Ocean fighting for entry. I watched him flounder on the edge, trying not to fall in with me, and my smile widened. The water flowing in formed a layer on top of the mud, floating my body free. I ducked beneath the surface, swimming to the eddy that swirled behind him.

"You have to surface some time, bitch, you can't swim forever. And when you do, I have a surprise waiting for you." He grasped his crotch with one hand. The surprise looked particularly small, even to my inexperienced eyes.

"Come on out!" he called, looking at the spot where I'd submerged, unaware that I'd surfaced behind him. His eyesight must be worse than I thought. He couldn't see death lurking in the shadows. All the better for my surprise.

I started to sing, keeping my voice so soft it was beyond the range of human hearing, yet I could see it affecting him. His body grew rigid and his eyes widened. I increased the volume so that he could hear me, but the only part of him that moved was his increasingly furious expression.

"Come on in," I said slowly, beckoning as I hoped he understood.

The man staggered toward the water, his fear increasing with every step. I sang again, louder still, and his pace increased. Two more steps. One. He splashed into the water, feet first, and his boots dragged him deep into the mud beneath the surface, where he couldn't breathe. He stood like a statue, desperately trying to move as he held his breath. Ah, but this man was in my world now and he would never leave it.

I dove under the surface, so that I could float face to face with him as he died. I wondered if he could see me as well as I saw him, but I didn't care. This was for my satisfaction and not his.

When death claimed him, his arms lifted from his sides and his head sagged – my control over his body died with him. Leaving the corpse behind, I shot to the surface before I was forced to swim through the filth that his body expelled. Drowned men voided their bowels like any other dead body.

I eyed off the hole in the hull. Water was pouring in so fast that there was nothing I could do to stop the flow. I couldn't save the ship, but perhaps I could save some of its crew if I hurried. Hauling myself out onto the catwalk, I slammed the door open and sprinted down the passage and up the

ladder to the crew quarters. Darkness followed me, for it was night time and most of the lights were dimmed for sleep.

I shook the young apprentice awake. "Charlie. Ship is sinking."

The boy grumbled under his breath but didn't wake, so I took a deep breath and started to sing again. If I could control the angry attempted rapist, the sympathetic Charlie would be no problem, I hoped. "Ship sinking. Save...everyone," I told the boy.

The boy nodded and crawled out of bed, heading for the captain's cabin. I hid in the shadows while I watched him hammer on the captain's door and tell him of the impending disaster. Satisfied, I headed up to the deck. The sea surface looked closer than it had since I'd boarded...just a short jump and I'd be swimming again. I glanced back at the men clambering into the lifeboats. For a moment, I considered killing them all so that none would live to tell the tale of the girl they'd found floating in the middle of the ocean. They'd let the bastard imprison me, after all. Even if they hadn't condoned his actions, they hadn't stopped him or tried to help me.

No. Their chances of survival were slim enough without my interference. Sober, most of them were kind men who deserved a chance at life. Aside from the angry man who'd hurt me, of course. The man who would have hurt me much earlier if it hadn't been for William. Wait, William – where was he? I didn't see him on the lifeboats – he must still be below. I couldn't let him drown. I dashed for the hatch.

I'd barely made it down the first two steps before strong arms grabbed me, smashing my body against the bulkhead. Pain exploded as another rib fractured and I heard my voice cry out before a hand clamped over my throat, cutting off my air.

"He said it was bad luck to bring a woman aboard. What'd you do to Barrett?" my assailant demanded. Sciarra – Barrett's friend.

I attempted to swallow, but I couldn't. I couldn't even draw in enough breath to speak. William would die if this man prevented me from waking him. No. I wouldn't let that happen.

He slammed me against the bulkhead again, further abusing my already bruised body. "I found him in the hold. You didn't know he was meeting me there, did you? You killed him and sank the ship, bitch. You're trying to kill us all – just like I bet you did to your last ship. And I'm going to make sure you...gurnghk!"

I dropped my knee from his crushed balls, sucking in a deep breath. "William!" I screamed. I had to save him – there was so little time. The ship was sinking fast.

Sciarra's fist met my jaw, engulfing my head in blinding blackness, and I crumpled to the deck. He was on top of me, wrenching at my pants before I could even see. "I'm going to fuck you right here outside the captain's cabin for that, bitch. And then I'm going to leave you here to drown with the ship."

I gritted my teeth. "No."

My pants ripped and a meaty hand bruised the bare skin of my thigh. His other hand fumbled between us for his own pants as he shoved his knee between my legs. "Yes," he grunted.

"No," another voice said as a gaff slammed into the side of Sciarra's head. Sciarra crashed against the bulkhead and didn't rise – I hoped he'd been knocked out cold. He and Barrett had agreed to meet in the hold, where they'd imprisoned me. Both of them had planned to rape me and neither would survive the night, I vowed.

A clatter caught my attention as William threw the gaff down and extended his hand. "Are you all right?" he asked as he helped me to my shaky feet.

I nodded, swallowing in the hope of finding my voice. "Thank you, William."

He grinned. "Any time, lass. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner – before he hurt you." He waved at my torn clothes, reddened, and averted his eyes. I glanced down. My breasts were visible through my torn shirt and my pants hung low on my hips, exposing more skin. I tried to cover myself up with the shredded shirt, but I fought a losing battle. "Let me get you another shirt. I'll have to buy more when we make port – I've never met a woman who liked to destroy my clothing so much." He took my arm and tried to pull me into his cabin. "I've been looking for you all day. I need to explain, to apologise, to–"

I shook my head and pulled back. "Ship sinking. Must go." I pointed in the direction of the lifeboats above. It was my turn to tug on his arm, trying to convey my urgency. I didn't know the right words to make him move. "Not...die," I said. I turned away, almost crying with relief when I felt the heat of his body against my back. I scrambled up the ladder, trying to keep my pants from tangling around my ankles. Strong arms encircled my waist, holding my pants in place as he lifted me to the deck. My skin tingled from the touch and I wanted him to touch more, but that could cost him his life. I needed to get him to a lifeboat.

His longer strides carried him ahead of me, so it wasn't long before he was dragging me behind him and I struggled to keep up as my sinking pants threatened to trip me. "Maria!" he called, glancing back. "Maria, hurry!"

I did hurry, but the ship gave a lurch and I tripped, losing my grip on my pants.

"Don't be afraid, lass. I'll keep you safe." William scooped me up in his arms and carried me to the lifeboat. He passed me to the other crewmen before scrambling in after me. They started lowering the boat into the water and I turned my gaze to the dark surface beneath us. Adrift on the ocean again – perhaps that was my fate. At least the ocean's depths would claim my attackers. Ocean's justice. I smiled.

Twenty-Two

"Sciarra!" a voice shouted. "The ship's sinking, man! Get into the lifeboat before you drown! We'll swing around and pick you up!" I stared at the ship, now sitting far too low in the water. Waves were already washing across the deck – the *Trevessa* wouldn't remain on the surface much longer. Yet as I watched, a figure staggered and splashed to the remaining lifeboat. Sciarra. If he reached it, he'd survive.

NO.

I tensed, readying my muscles for flight. I could remain in the lifeboat with William and the non-hostile crew, perhaps even helping them to safety, or I could ensure the violent bastard died for his crimes. Bitterness and bile or fleeting hope?

Men started shouting about cutting the boat free before the ship dragged us down with her. Panic ensued as several men sawed at the ropes holding us to the sinking ship and I saw my chance.

William grabbed my arm. "No, lass. Stay with me so I can make amends to you for last night. You don't owe the man anything. He'll reach the lifeboat and have as much chance as any of us. Don't risk your life for him."

I melted beneath his cold fingers, wishing I could simply sink into those welcoming arms and forget all that had happened since they had last held me. But I did not forget, nor forgive. The violent human had hurt me and he would pay the highest price the ocean could offer. I sprang, clearing the distance between the lifeboat and the sinking vessel, and grabbed the rail. Laboriously, I hauled my aching body aboard to the sound of William shouting himself hoarse. A wave crashed over me, filling my mouth with seawater as it knocked me flat. I coughed up a lungful of liquid and felt a searing pain in my scalp.

"I knew you wanted me. Now we'll have a boat all to ourselves until we reach land. You're going to learn to please me, bitch, or I'll let you drown like Barrett," Sciarra said as he dragged me across the deck, his hands knotted in my hair. He threw me into a lifeboat and the impact made me expel all my breath in one hit, so I could neither breathe nor respond. It didn't matter – he needed to cut the lifeboat free from the ship before he could hurt me again. This time, I'd be ready. I pulled a breath into my searing lungs, followed by another. Quietly, I began to sing – a different song to the one I'd sung in the hold. This one had teeth and blood lust to boot, for this song had sunk the *Emden*.

The keel bumped across the railings and I saw the ship loom above us as she tipped on her side, hiding William and the rest of the crew from me – and us from them, I realised. It was now or never. I struggled to stand, surveying the swell. Did I imagine it, or did a fin cut the water of a wave? No, there was another...and another. Sharks and shipwreck – a duo Sciarra would not survive. Not to mention me.

Sciarra sawed through the last of the ropes and sank to the bench seat before he saw me. "Get down, bitch." He brandished a knife. The blade glinted in a flash of lightning.

I shook my head and smiled at him. Moving my weight from one foot to another, I started to rock the boat. He clung to the sides, shouting at me to stop. I shifted faster, letting the gunwales touch the water before moving my weight to the other foot. I raised my voice, singing loud enough for him to hear me over the storm. He slashed at me with the knife, but I dodged and he overbalanced. He landed on top of the blade, skewering his hand. He gave a roar and leaped to his feet, charging at me.

I jumped, landed hard, and felt the boat tip beneath me, throwing us both into the waves. Cold water kissed my skin as I pulled off my ripped pants so that I could shift to my true form. I clothed myself in my own skin – the shallow-water blue of a Maori wrasse – and opened my gills to take a life-giving breath from my ocean home. Behind me, the sound of stressed steel screeched beneath the surface as the ship sank. I breathed deep, letting the draught of dissolved oxygen cool my instincts to those of the killer I knew myself to be. I blew spent water out of my gills, taking another gulp before I searched for my prey.

Heedless of the sharks, Sciarra swam for the boat, trailing blood behind him like burley. I darted toward him, overtaking the human easily, and seized his foot, dragging him down to where he couldn't breathe. His face showed his panic as his arms clawed wildly for the surface.

I raised my voice and sang a command to the sharks, which started an intricate, spinning dance around their supper. He screamed sweetly as they shredded him, piece by piece until the screaming ceased.

Blood swirled in the turbulent water as the sharks churned it further, looking for more to eat. None were frenzied enough to approach me, but my pants were not so lucky. Two sharks fought over the floating fabric, thrashing the water into foam so that I didn't see the boat approaching until it was above me.

"Maria!" William's anguished cry smote my heart.

Oars scattered the sharks and one carefully lifted my shredded clothing from the water.

"Those were Maria's," I heard William's voice say. "The sharks must have...oh God, I hope she didn't suffer. She saved us all – even tried to save Sciarra. She was an angel sent to save us all."

I itched to surface and show them that I still lived, but caution stayed my fins. I'd need to shift back into my human form without them seeing my tail and that took time. It would be dangerous for them, too, with hungry sharks still swimming nearby. I was safer beneath the surface and lost to them.

"God rest her soul," said another man. "The ocean takes her own. Always has."

Yes. The elders of this ocean might reject me, but the ocean herself never would. I was one of the people of the ocean's gift, after all, and this was my home.

"Time to set sail. If we mean to survive, we must make Madagascar or Mauritius. Land is to the north-west and a long way from here. The men who take first watch may have the first cigarette ration when the storm is over. Volunteers?"

My mangled pants landed in the water above me and something golden-brown slipped from the pocket. My comb – the gift from William. The only thing I owned and it was sinking. I dove after it, snatching it from the water. This wasn't my home any more – home was with William. I surged to the surface.

The boat was gone. I rose to the crest of a wave, searching the ocean for my love. A glimpse of white in the trough between waves, far from me, told me I was too late. I could never catch up to them now. The boat sported a tall mast and a white sail caught the gale, driving them in the direction of land. I farewelled William with my eyes, not daring to say the words aloud as he sailed away with my heart.

I wondered what to do now. I couldn't return to my people, so my choices were a solitary existence out here or an attempt to reach land and make a life among humans. Men like Sciarra and Barrett – but men like Giuseppe and William, too.

If I hadn't stupidly pursued my trinket, I might have shared the lifeboat with William and I'd be winging my way to a human life with him. Instead, I had the open ocean and an overturned lifeboat all to myself. Wearily, I sent a wave to tip my boat upright as I shifted my tail to legs and hauled myself over the gunwale. I tucked the precious comb into my hair.

The bottom of the boat was awash, so I opened one of the footlockers, searching for a bucket. Instead, I found a sail and some tins of condensed milk. Further scrabbling unearthed a can opener, so I pried the milk can open and drank the lot. The sweetness made me gag, but it seemed wasteful to pour the milk over the side. Using the empty can, I bailed water from my boat until my arms were too tired to lift the tin any more. I wrapped myself in the sail and stretched my aching body along the bottom, letting exhaustion and sleep claim me. At least I had a boat to sit in while I awaited rescue from the next passing ship – far better than the raft I'd borrowed last time.

Twenty-Three

I woke in daylight, squinting at the grey clouds that gave no indication of the time of day. The storm wasn't over yet.

My boat had taken on more water overnight, topped up by my tears at losing William, so I found the floating milk can and returned most of the seawater to the ocean. By the time I was done, my stomach demanded breakfast. I eyed off the milk cans in the locker before closing it firmly. I'd had enough human food for a while. With no humans in sight, I chose a more tempting meal.

I lowered my aching body over the side and into the numbing water. I dipped my face beneath the surface and started to sing, careful to keep one hand firmly on my boat. The fish that answered my call was precisely what I wanted – a small wahoo, young enough to be curious, but big enough to make a meal. One snap of his spine was all it took to end his life before I threw him into the boat. I hoisted myself in after him and proceeded to eat my fill of his dense flesh. The wahoo certainly beat a fresh tuna, not to mention a marmite sandwich. Humans ate some very strange things.

Feeling pleasantly full, I threw his bony carcass into the waves and reclined. For a long time, I watched the clouds until the day turned to dark night with no stars or moon in sight.

Once again, I curled up under the sail and sank into slumber.

Twenty-Four

The boat rocked beneath me, reminding me of the lifeboat I should have been on. The one that the crew had winched into the water. The one I hoped still held the man I wished I was with. William.

Light blinded me and my heart leaped, for the light came not from the sun but from one of the handheld tubes William had called a torch. "William?" I asked.

"Get the captain. He needs to see this," an unfamiliar male voice said. Not William.

"Yes, Mr Alexander." Footsteps on the deck faded away.

Mr Alexander directed the light away from my eyes and my sight slowly returned. "Were you on the *Trevessa*?" he asked.

Pressing my lips tightly together, I nodded. If they'd found my boat, perhaps they'd also found the other lifeboats and rescued the man I loved. Tears sprang to my eyes. "William?"

Another face peered down at me.

"Captain?" Mr Alexander said quietly.

The new man shook his head. "I've never seen the girl before in my life. She's in one of the *Trevessa*'s lifeboats, yet there's no record of a woman aboard the ship. There was a William listed as a passenger. Some Scottish name. McKenzie or something. Is that the man you mean, girl? William McKenzie?"

I swallowed. "William McGregor," I whispered.

"Was he on the lifeboat with you? For you were the only one in it when we found you." I shook my head and he continued, "We haven't found the other lifeboats – only yours."

William wasn't here. I should have followed his boat and kept him safe. I started to sob, covering my face with my arms so the men wouldn't see my naked grief. A light touch traced the bruised flesh of my arm.

"Did McGregor do this to you?"

I shook my head violently, glaring at the captain for even suggesting such a thing.

"Fetch Mrs D'Angelo and ask her to meet us in her cabin. Explain to her that we need her help on a matter of utmost secrecy – and it's an emergency."

Mr Alexander nodded, striding out of my field of vision. The captain remained.

"I'm Captain Dunnet of the *Trevean*. We're searching for survivors from the *Trevessa* and you're the first we've found. We'll keep looking – no sign of the other lifeboats is a good sign. Do you know if they made it to the boats before the ship sank?"

I nodded.

Captain Dunnet pressed, "Was your William aboard your boat?" I shook my head. "Then there's hope for him yet. If we don't find him, the other boats may reach land. Captain Foster was a good

man and a good friend. If McGregor is with Foster, then he has a better chance at sea than any man alive."

He reached for me and I cowered against the boards at the bottom of the lifeboat, pulling the sail close around me. He sighed. "Not all men are like the ones who hurt you. I'm here to help." He held out his hand and I took it, accepting his help to rise to my feet, clutching the sail to hide my nakedness. I wasn't going to make the mistake of showing my body to the men of this ship as I had the last – I'd been through enough. I wanted to take a rest from killing people so that I could learn what it was to be human. To become one of them, if only for a little while.

Holding Captain Dunnet's hand, I followed him down the ladder to my new cabin.

Twenty-Five

Two steps inside, I stopped dead. It appeared I was to share this cabin, too, but with William's opposite.

Instead of a smiling young man, I met the gaze of a frowning older woman. Her cold eyes drifted from me to the captain. I heard the click as he closed the door behind him.

"If you expect me to keep her condition a secret, you're sorely mistaken. No woman deserves to be beaten like this. Where did you find her and who is responsible for the deplorable act?" Her voice rang with authority – she sounded like my mother.

Captain Dunnet's voice was low as he replied, "We fished up one of the *Trevessa*'s lifeboats today and found her aboard. Whoever did this was aboard the *Trevessa*. There are no women listed as passengers, so she must have been a stowaway or someone smuggled her aboard. Even a stowaway's entitled to some dignity – to be put ashore at the next port, in the hands of the authorities, but it looks like she was kept a secret and...ill-used instead. Now, we're committed to searching for survivors, but if the rest of the crew hear of this, half of them will want to call off the search, while the other half will want to continue, to bring the offenders to justice. If we find survivors, what will happen if we bring aboard the men who did this to her? I'm asking you to keep her hidden from the crew and keep her safe until we reach port in Fremantle."

I returned the woman's stare with fish-cold eyes. The two humans might be engaging in a power struggle, but I wouldn't submit to either of them. I'd killed two men and sunk one ship already this week – what was one more?

"Very well. Someone must take care of the girl, so I shall. But if the men who did this survive the shipwreck, heaven help them, for I will see them charged for this." The woman waved him away and he left without another word.

"Sit down," she said to me, gesturing at the bunk. I perched on the edge of the mattress, tucking the sail around me. She continued to stare at me, her eyes raking me from top to toe. After some time, she sank onto the bunk opposite me. "What's your name?"

"Maria."

"Tell me what happened."

I swallowed. I didn't know the words to explain half of it, but I was determined to try. "Ship sank."

She shook her head and pointed at my arm. "To you, Maria. What happened to you? Did someone hurt you?"

I nodded curtly, glancing down at my arms. The bruises formed a dark rainbow that looked quite disturbing. No wonder these humans were so shocked.

"What happened to the men who did this?"

I hesitated for a moment, before deciding to be honest. Let her fear me a little. "Sharks." I felt my face lift in a grin.

"Sharks?" she repeated.

I nodded. I thought of Sciarra screaming as the sharks tore him to pieces and only wished the brutish Barrett could have shared his fate. I was far more dangerous than any shark and the fish knew it, too. "Sharks."

To my surprise, she burst out laughing. "I can't say I'm sorry. I think you and I are going to get along fine, Maria. I'm Meryl D'Angelo, but you can call me Aunt Merry. Let's get some arnica on those bruises and I'll see if I can find you some clothes. I have boxes of them from my friends and relatives in England to donate to the poor people in Australia. They'll be poorer still once they see the outdated fashions I have. Some of these are older than me!" She laughed again, before gesturing at me. "Stand up and take that piece of sailcloth off. Let me look at you so I can work out what might fit you."

Perhaps for the first time in my life, I obeyed. I rose to my feet and let go of the salt-stiffened sail, which slipped to the floor. Her horrified gasp made me look down. The sordid rainbow across my broken ribs made my eyes water.

"With breasts like that, it's probably a good thing I have some fashions from a few years ago," she managed to say. "If I put you in one of the flapper dresses my nieces were wearing, men wouldn't be able to stare at anything but your chest. So, are you ready to have some fun?" She dropped to her knees by one of the boxes on the floor and flipped open a clasp. Lifting the lid, she pulled out ruffled, frilly garments like those she was wearing.

I shrugged off the shredded shirt that was all I had left from the *Trevessa* and braced myself. Women's clothing and a willing teacher. She offered me everything I wanted...except for the one thing I wanted most. William. With a heavy heart, I took the garments she offered and clothed myself in another new life.

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The tale continues in
Ocean's Widow
which you can get HERE.

Silence:

Little Mermaid Retold

Demelza Carlton

A tale in the Romance a Medieval Fairy Tale series

A little mermaid. A prince to save. Only silence can break the spell.

Once upon a time...

The mermaid Margareta saved Prince Erik from a shipwreck. Wanting to see the prince again, Margareta strikes a bargain with the Master of Beacon Isle. If she saves his sons from a terrible curse, he will reunite her with Prince Erik. All she has to do is stay silent until the curse is broken.

Silence is a virtue...until Prince Erik arrives early, searching for the mermaid who saved his life.

Can two hearts speak louder than words?

One

The ocean sang in harmony with the oncoming storm. Though she stood on deck, Margareta could hear the song so clearly she wanted to join in. Three times the captain had tried to persuade her to go below decks, or into his cabin at the very least, but she hadn't budged. As long as a single man stood on deck, so would she.

Besides, the cabin was crowded enough with the young prince, his entourage and the cloying reek of seasickness.

She smelled it first, before the fine down on her bare forearms stood on end. Then blinding light erupted from the deck, consuming the mast before splashing across the sky. She clapped her hands over her ears, but it did little to quiet the thunderclap when it came.

After that, silence descended on the ship, for the thunderclap had deafened them all.

When the smoking mast cracked into pieces, smashing through the cabin and all those within, no one heard their screams, or the horrible ripping squeal as the ship's beams broke asunder, surrendering to the sea.

While panicked sailors raced around, trying to put out the fires or save themselves, Margareta sat on the deck and calmly removed her shoes and stockings. There wasn't time for more, as the deck was already awash. The ocean licked at her bare toes, enticing her in.

Margareta climbed over the railing, until there was nothing between her and the waves below. She closed her eyes and dropped, feeling the ocean's cold embrace welcoming her home.

It would be so easy to change into a more suitable form for swimming, and let her mermaid instincts take her to depths where no human could follow, but Margareta resisted. She was supposed to be on the surface, not in the sea. She was the daughter of the Master of Beacon Isle, and Beacon Isle was where she belonged right now.

The island was miles away, and it would be a much easier journey in a boat than relying on her own fins. Maybe one of the lighters had survived intact.

Margareta surfaced to survey the wreckage floating amid the waves. A hatch cover, what looked like a cabin door, barrels, corpses, the curve of an overturned boat...

Smiling, Margareta swam for the boat. A well-placed wave set it right way up. All she had to do was climb in and the ocean would take her home.

She had one hand on the gunwale when she clearly heard someone shout, "For God's sake, help me!" before the words ended in a gurgle.

Among the floating corpses was someone who wasn't dead yet, though he would be soon, if no one helped him. He clung to a splintered chunk of mast that rolled in the waves like a drunken sailor. As Margareta watched, it rolled him under the water before bringing him to the surface again, coughing and spluttering.

"Help!"

Margareta did. Guiding the boat to his side, she reached out to haul him in. He was heavier than she expected, though he was the same size as she, and the boat nearly capsized, but water was her element, so Margareta won him from the ocean.

He flopped into the bottom of the boat, the most unlikely catch ever landed. His fine clothes marked him as one of the prince's entourage, but his gasping mouth made him look more like a fish.

"You're just a girl!" he said.

She was far more than just a girl, but Margareta had more important matters to attend to than educating one of the prince's servants. "I'm the girl who saved your life, and I'd have thought you'd have learned better manners as the prince's pageboy."

"Squire," the boy corrected. "I am...I mean, I was...Prince Philip's squire." He was silent for a moment. "They're all dead now, aren't they? He asked me to fetch them some wine, so I was on deck when the mast crashed into the cabin. It must have crushed them instantly."

Margareta surveyed the corpses, then closed her eyes. "Yes, they are all dead. We are the only ones left, and to survive, we must reach the shore. Do you think you can – "

She should have kept her eyes on the ocean, for she knew how treacherous it could be. One moment they were in the boat, the next a wave sent them tumbling back into the water.

Margareta came up cursing. She'd bitten her lip, so it was with blood on her tongue that she commanded the ocean to do her bidding. The waves brought the boat to her, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. "Find him," she said tersely, ducking under the surface to search for herself.

A glint caught her eye – metal reflecting the lightning above – and she dived, shifting to her tail to give her the power to drag the boy back to the surface. This time, she made the waves lift him into the boat as she hauled herself aboard.

"Take us home," she ordered, and the waves obeyed, parting to form a path before her as a powerful surface current pushed the boat along it.

Satisfied that the ocean would continue to do her bidding without her watching, Margareta turned her attention to the boy. There was no gasping now, nor breathing, either.

"Don't you die on me, squire, or I'll throw you back over the side," she threatened.

No response.

"I saved your life, so it belongs to me, not the ocean. You hear me? No dying on me, now!"

She pounded his chest and back until he coughed up the water he'd swallowed and began to breathe again.

"Who are you?" he croaked out.

"I'm the girl who saved your life," she said again. "So what's your name, squire?"

He mumbled something that Margareta couldn't quite make out, but before she could ask him to repeat it, he fell back against the boards, unconscious. At least he was alive.

Leaving the stormy ocean in her wake, Margareta's vessel sailed for home.

Two

The journey took so long, Margareta stretched out along the bottom of the boat with the boy to get some sleep. She didn't wake until she felt the keel scrape along the sand, and then it was to the bewildering sight of the boy's arms wrapped around her, as she embraced him. She only had a moment to reflect on it, before a wave tipped the boat over on its side and they both tumbled out onto the wet sand.

The wave retreated faster than it had advanced, taking the boat with it.

Margareta considered for a moment, then let the sea have its fun. She had no further need of the boat, for she was back at Beacon Isle. She felt refreshed by her swim and short voyage, but the boy looked the worse for wear. That he was still unconscious worried her. She dragged him further up the beach, out of reach of the playful waves, but still he didn't rouse. Perhaps he had been injured. The surgeon in Harbour Town would know what to do.

She rose, straightened her salt-dampened gown, and marched up to her father's house. Pausing only to ask a maid to have some water sent up to her chamber so that she might wash, Margareta headed for her father's chamber, where she was certain he would be at this time of the morning.

"Good morning, Father," she greeted the Master of Beacon Isle. "We have a man on the beach in need of medical attention. A boy, really, but he claimed to be the prince's squire before he nearly drowned."

"Good morning, Margareta. I – " Father broke off to peer at her. "I thought the *Golden Eagle* wasn't due back in port until tomorrow. I didn't hear it return."

"And you won't," Margareta said bluntly. "It was more of a wallowing duck than any kind of eagle. The stupid captain sailed her into a storm and she sank."

Father sighed. "Margareta, what have I said about sinking ships? I realise it is your nature, but – "

"It wasn't me!" she protested. "I haven't sunk a ship in my life! I told the captain about the storm, but he didn't listen. Lightning struck the mast and it exploded into flaming pieces. There was little I could do but return home."

"What of the prince? The captain and his crew?"

Margareta sighed with genuine regret. "Dead. All dead. Except for the boy I left on the beach, of course. If he survives. Can you send a surgeon down

there, please, and some strong men to carry him to the house?"

"What, aren't you going to carry him up here yourself? You've played the knight in shining armour, rescuing him and all. Let him play the swooning princess while you carry him up to your chambers to seduce him." Father grinned as though he'd made the best joke.

Margareta frowned. "I don't intend to seduce him. The boy nearly died. You must think me a monster, Father, if you believe I would do such a thing. I...I'm going to wash, and change into fresh things that aren't encrusted in salt. Please have someone see to the boy." Not waiting for her father's response, she swept out of the solar.

Three

Erik drifted, dreaming of a mermaid who had saved him. A few times, he could have sworn he felt her in his arms, like one of the sirens in the stories. But sirens lured men to their deaths, just as mermaids dragged mariners to the depths of the sea. He'd never heard a tale about one who saved people.

When he awoke alone on the sand, he was disappointed. Oh, not that he wasn't dead – that he was quite relieved about, or he would be, once he worked out where the mermaid had gone.

Perhaps she had only left to get her sisters, and together they would finish him off.

"Is he dead?" a male voice asked.

Erik leaped to his feet. He found himself face to face with three fishermen, their arms full of fishing nets. "Prince Philip is dead," he said.

One of the men shrugged. "Don't know any princes. But dead men don't talk or jump, so I'd say he's not dead."

"He looked dead," one of the others said.

"Maybe he's like that miracle man who came back to life," the third ventured eagerly.

Erik didn't feel like a miracle man, nor did he deserve it, if Philip was dead and he yet lived. "Is there a town nearby? Or somewhere I might find a ship? I must go home to tell the king about Prince Philip."

"Up that way, just over the dune," the first man said, pointing. "White Harbour always has some ships coming and going."

Erik thanked them and trudged toward what turned out to be a sizeable town, clustered around a busy harbour that he recognised as the one at Beacon Isle. Could it really have been less than a week since he sailed out of this very harbour?

He enquired at the docks, and soon found a vessel willing to carry him and his ill tidings home, though for a price.

"Do you have any coin to pay for the passage, boy?" the captain asked, squinting at him.

Erik reached for his belt, where he still carried Philip's purse. He had coin enough to pay for the passage of their entire party home, but he knew better than to say so. "Will two silvers buy me a cabin on a ship that sails on the

next tide?" he asked innocently, showing the captain his two coins while palming a third.

"The next tide?" The captain's eyes widened. "I had not thought to leave until the morrow. Rounding up the crew, loading the cargo...these things take time. But for three silver coins, I might manage it." He held out his hand a little too eagerly for Erik's liking.

Erik sighed and counted the coins mournfully into the captain's outstretched hand. "Very well. Show me to my cabin."

The cabin the captain ushered him into was barely big enough to hold a bed, but Erik didn't care. He stretched out on the pallet and stared at the wooden ceiling, wishing he wasn't the one who would have to tell his parents that their favourite son was dead. Maybe that's why the mermaid had spared him: she knew a worse fate awaited him if he lived.

All too soon, the ship cast off, and he felt the lull of the waves once more. Erik surrendered to sleep, only to dream of a mermaid who rocked him in her arms.

Four

When she was dry and dressed, Margareta returned to the beach where she'd left the boy. She was surprised to find no one but a few fishermen mending their nets, like they normally did in the afternoon. Her father had heard her, after all, she marvelled.

But when she asked the servants which guest quarters he'd been given, no one could tell her anything. It was as though none of them had yet seen him. Her father would know, she was sure of it, so Margareta marched back to her father's solar to ask him.

She found him bowed over the desk, with his head in his hands.

"What's wrong, Father?" she asked. "Is he dead?"

He glanced up. "Who?"

"The boy on the beach." Margareta wished she'd thought to ask the squire's name.

"I know nothing of any boy, except my own. And they have flown." He sighed heavily. "Something terrible has happened to your brothers."

Margareta clutched the table so hard her knuckles went white. "What happened? They're not dead, are they?"

He shook his head. "No, but they may as well be. While they were hunting, they met a witch, who took offence at some imagined slight. Before they could stop her, she cursed them. All of them. She turned them into birds and made them fly far away."

Knowing her brothers, the slight was probably not imagined, Margareta knew, but she didn't say. For all her reputation for seduction as a siren, even the most chaste of her brothers could boast more romantic conquests than she. Most likely one of them had made a coarse comment, and the others had joined in, until she cursed them all.

"Is there a way the curse can be broken? Did you speak to the witch? Perhaps – " she began.

Father silenced her with a wave of his hand. "She presented herself right here in my solar, and told me she would never lift the curse. But the curse could be lifted by a maiden who loved my boys enough to make a huge sacrifice for them." He reached for her hand. "Margareta, I know you like to save people. Here is your chance. Do you love your brothers?"

She might not like them at times, but... "Yes, I love them," she said steadily.

"Are you willing to make sacrifices to save them?"

Margareta hesitated, before she finally said, "What kind of sacrifices?"

"She said they could be saved in one of two ways. If each of them could persuade one woman to declare her love and dedicate her life to one of your brothers, a dozen girls in the same night, they might break the curse themselves."

Margareta burst out laughing. "If my brothers – all twelve of them – agreed to get married at all, let alone on the same night, to women who truly loved them...Father, that would be a greater miracle than raising a man from the dead. If that is their only chance, then my brothers are truly lost."

"There is another way."

She managed to stop laughing. "There had better be, or they shall be birds forever."

His grip tightened around her fingers. "If one maiden is willing to sacrifice her voice for as long as it takes to break the curse, they will be set free. She cannot speak or laugh or even whisper."

"One maiden. That would be me, I imagine? You wish me to be silent for...how long, exactly?"

He shook his head. "I do not know. Weeks. Months. Maybe even years. Until the witch believes you have sacrificed enough to make her lift the curse and restore my sons to me."

"Father, find someone else. I must find the boy. He was unconscious, and needed help. I can't find him if I can't ask anyone about him."

Father captured her other hand, squeezing both in a desperate entreaty. "Margareta, my darling Meg, there is no one else. If you love me, as you love your brothers, you will do this. Save them. I will find a place for you in the priory, and tell them you have taken a vow of silence. You can roam through the rose garden, or spend all day in the library, or do whatever you please, as long as you do it in silence. I beg you to save your brothers."

The library and the rose garden were her two favourite places on the island, as her father knew well. It would mean staying longer on land, too, without returning to the ocean where instinct might take over and make a monster of her as it had so many of her mother's kind. She needed very little persuasion when he offered her such things. But... "What of the boy?" she asked sharply. She needed to know he was safe.

"I will find him, and make sure he is safe. If you will save my sons, my heirs."

Margareta took a deep breath. "All right, Father. I will do it. Silence my voice to save my brothers."

"Thank you!" He threw his arms around her, hugging her as he hadn't since she was a child.

And from that moment, not a sound passed her lips. For her father was right about one thing. If she chose to save someone – be it her brothers from some folly or some nameless squire from a shipwreck – she would not rest until she had succeeded.

Five

For a week, Margareta wandered through the house and the priory like a corporeal ghost. She avoided people she would normally acknowledge, taking her meals alone in her chambers. If it weren't for the library and the rose garden, she would have been bored out of her mind.

All right, she was ready to scream when a thin wail erupted from the other end of the rose garden. Curiosity got the better of her, so Margareta crossed the courtyard to investigate.

The wail issued from a bundle of blankets held tightly to a young woman's breast. The woman herself reclined on a bed of sorts, and she was wrapped in more blankets than her baby.

"Lady Margareta!" the nun exclaimed before dropping a deep curtsey. "Lady Margareta is the Master's daughter. She has taken a vow of silence, in the hope that her sacrifice will persuade the Lord to save her brothers."

Margareta opened her mouth to correct the woman, then remembered and closed it again.

"My lady, may I present Lady Penelope, widow to the late but valiant Sir Godfrey, who died defending the priory?"

Margareta inclined her head. She hadn't heard of any such knight, but if the baby in Lady Penelope's arms was his, he couldn't have died very long ago.

The nun fluttered her hands. "Oh, but you wouldn't have heard about Sir Godfrey's brave deeds, for you had not yet arrived. Lady Penelope, you must tell her."

It was Penelope's turn to duck her head. "Perhaps when I am recovered. I am but recently widowed and I fear the birth of my daughter..."

The nun's hands fluttered more violently. "But of course. Perhaps I should help you inside, so that you can rest?"

Penelope wrinkled her nose. "I much prefer it out here. I'm sure you have better things to do than hover around me all the time. I will be perfectly well here for a while, if Lady Margareta does not mind sharing her garden?"

For all that she wanted to be alone, Margareta knew she would look churlish if she refused. Besides, she was curious about the other woman. And she wanted a peek at the baby.

So Margareta smiled, spreading her arms wide to signify how delighted she was to share the garden her father had planted for her.

As if on cue, a bell tolled.

"Oh! That is the bell for prayers. I must go!" The nun hurried away.

When Margareta was sure the nun was out of earshot, Penelope said, "If you wish me gone, merely nod and I will ask them to take me somewhere else tomorrow. It is so different to things at home. There, I would have a private courtyard where I could sit and my sleeping chamber is just for sleeping. Here...why, the moment I arrived and they found out I was with child, they confined me to a dark room and seemed terrified that some dark spirit might harm me or the baby if a single ray of sunlight or a breath of fresh air reached us. I threatened to walk out here by myself if they did not let me out of that room."

Margareta felt a strong desire never to have children. Not that her father was likely to accept any offer of marriage that came her way, anyway. That would mean giving her a dowry and part of the island, which he would already have to divide between his twelve sons. Of course, that only strengthened her desire to hold Penelope's child, for if she could never have one of her own...

Margareta held out her arms for the baby.

Penelope looked surprised. "You want to hold her? Sure." She settled the baby in Margareta's arms and sat back. "Her name is Melitta."

Margareta stared at the sleeping child. She weighed next to nothing, yet Melitta held more power over her than the tiny girl would ever know. The aura of magic that swirled around her marked her as a witch. Magic followed bloodlines, which meant her mother might also have some magical talent. Or it could have come from her father, though it was rare for magical ability to manifest in men.

"My husband was a fool," Penelope said. At Margareta's startled glance, she smiled, revealing a spot of blood on her lip from where she'd bitten it to cast what Margareta could only guess was a spell of some kind. "A brave, loyal fool, but no less a fool. What talent she has comes from me, though it is very faint. I thought my mother's bloodline would end with me, until a woman who is what you would call a witch joined our travelling party. Back home, we would call her an enchantress. That's a powerful kind of witch, who can cast many types of spells, not just the one or two that she is best suited to."

Margareta nodded. Penelope would call her an enchantress, too, if she knew, though Margareta's power was limited by her nature. There had never been a mermaid witch before, and it was unlikely that there would be another. She could command water in ways that sent the other merfolk whispering and wishing she were far away, but any other spell – even the slightest blessing or curse – sapped her energy for hours. Penelope's power ran to...telepathy, she thought.

"Reading minds, yes," Penelope said. "Or strong emotions. I cannot change them, but I can perceive them. You should see Melitta's thoughts. Nothing but blurs of colour...and milk." She laughed.

Margareta ached to laugh with her, but she could not. Her father and her brothers depended on her silence. Yet with Penelope, she could perhaps hold something approaching a normal conversation. For the first time in Margareta's life, she wanted a friend. And a baby like Melitta, though motherhood would have to wait.

"I would like that," Penelope said. "Though I will ask one favour. Can you invite me into the garden every day? Arguing with the nuns here nearly wore me out before I made it outside." She winked. "I still might be in my room if I hadn't squeezed out a tear or two as I invoked Saint Godfrey, which is what they'll make of him if they are given their way. A brave, foolish man who would still be alive if he weren't such a brave fool. He should have left matters to the enchantress, as I did." Penelope smiled wanly. "I know you are curious. I will tell you the whole tale one day, but not today. I promise." She reached for the baby and Margareta reluctantly handed Melitta back to her mother.

Penelope's story could wait for another day.

Six

Erik trudged into his father's throne room with his eyes on the stone floor. He didn't want to meet his father's gaze at all, so when he approached the throne, he not only fell to his knees but bowed so low his forehead touched the stone.

"Father, I bring heavy news from Beacon Isle," he said.

The courtiers hushed each other, to better listen to his news.

"Crown Prince Philip is dead, as are all who sailed with him," Erik continued.

"How did he die?" Father demanded.

"The ship we were on ran into a storm. Lightning struck the mast, which crushed the ship's cabin when it fell. All those within perished, and the ship sank." For the first time, Erik wished he'd been inside the cabin with his brother, for he knew what the king would ask next.

"How did you survive, when your brother perished?"

Erik wished he could bow lower, so that he sank right through the stones. "Philip sent me to fetch more wine, so I wasn't in the cabin. I was thrown into the ocean with everyone else, but by some miracle, I found my way to an undamaged boat, and made my way to shore." A mermaid, not a miracle, Erik was certain, but his father would never believe him. He barely believed himself, and he'd seen her with his own eyes.

"The sea is a perilous mistress, that no man can withstand. Not even a king. Poor Philip," Father said gravely.

No man, maybe. But the more Erik thought about it, the more he remembered about his time on that little boat. There'd been a girl, he remembered now. She'd hauled him aboard the boat, but somehow he'd ended up back in the water. That's when he saw the mermaid. Much later, he'd found himself back on board the boat with her, and he'd heard her ordering someone or something to take them home. The mermaids, or maybe even the ocean itself. And he'd arrived safely on the shore, but alone.

She couldn't have perished. It just wasn't possible. He'd return to Beacon Isle and find her and...

"Arise, Sir Erik. As crown prince, you are now heir to the throne in your brother's place," Father said, before the courtiers erupted in applause.

Crown prince? No, he had to return and find her. He'd dreamed of her every night, and every morning felt lost to find her gone.

"You will report back to me here on the morrow. Before you can become king, you have a lot to learn," Father continued.

Erik's heart sank. He resolved to learn all he could about kingship as fast as possible, the sooner to return to the mysterious girl. And he would find her. Some day, some how, he vowed, he would hold her in his arms again.

Seven

Unbeknownst to Margareta or Penelope, the nuns had commissioned a stone plaque to mark Sir Godfrey's grave. The stonemason brought it on his pony cart and the nuns decided to make it into a solemn celebration of the knight's deeds. Penelope and Melitta walked at the head of the procession, followed by most of the priory's residents, who had traded their white robes for mourning black. The pony cart brought up the rear, kicking up a great deal of dust that spurred Margareta to hurry to the front, where she could walk at Penelope's side, ostensibly to offer the widow support.

Penelope walked with her spine straight and her head held high. Her eyes were dry, and though her gown was as black as those worn by the nuns, her face was unshadowed.

Either there was little love between Sir Godfrey and Penelope, or her sorrow ran so deep she could not bear to show it on the surface, Margareta mused. She watched Penelope through the drawn-out erection ceremony, as the knight's monument was carried from the cart to its final resting place over his grave and a great number of prayers were uttered for his soul, but Margareta could not decide the truth of her friend's heart.

She had no chance to ask her during the sombre funeral feast in the priory's great hall, where the silence was broken by Melitta's insistent wail that it was time for her meal, too.

Penelope excused herself and Margareta followed her back to her chambers. The widow and her daughter slept in one of the priory's guest apartments, large, airy rooms with windows facing the sea. Penelope had set up her loom before one of the windows, where the light was brightest, though she had not yet started to make cloth.

Penelope took her accustomed position on the bed, propped up by pillows, as she fed Melitta. Margareta had seen the other woman feed the infant many times, but it still made her hungry for something she could not yet have. Not the milk – there were goats and cows aplenty on the island, and she could send down to the kitchens for fresh milk any time she wanted. No, she wanted a child like Melitta. To beget a child, she would need a husband, though, and would the child be enough to keep her from mourning if she lost her husband?

"You think me heartless, don't you?" Penelope said suddenly. She laughed softly. "No, I am not using magic to read your thoughts. I can see it in your eyes. You think because I do not cry for Godfrey, that I am not prostrate with grief at his passing, that I could not have loved him."

Margareta shook her head, but Penelope had turned her gaze on the baby at her breast.

"You're wrong, you know. He was a good, kind man, and I did love him. Perhaps not as much as he loved me, but then he was passionate in ways that I am not. And it killed him. He believed we were in danger, and he acted recklessly. Without thought. Anyone who'd paused for even a moment's reflection would have seen that the brigands were not interested in me. What was one waddling pregnant woman, when what they really wanted were the novices. Young maidens who were already prepared to serve. I've seen so many such women in the slave markets at home. Maidens fetch a higher price, though they do not remain maidens for long. Too many men believe dipping their wick in one can work miracles, and it's too late for the girls when the men discover what they were told is wrong. The brigands and slave sellers probably spread such rumours themselves, so that they can command a higher price for the girls they capture."

But there were no brigands on Beacon Isle, Margareta knew. Her father would have driven such ruffians off the island in a heartbeat, if he did not choose to hang them. She willed Penelope to read her mind and finally tell her what had happened the night her husband died.

Penelope looked up and her gaze met Margareta's. "I will tell you," she said slowly. "I know you think your rank protects you from the fate awaiting any common-born maiden the slavers capture, but you are wrong in that, too. Without a strong male protector or a powerful enchantress at your side, you are merely property in their eyes – and you can be bought and sold."

And on that chilling note, Penelope began her tale.

Eight

A rare summer storm had closed White Harbour to ships, for the normally calm stretch of water was battered by waves that would break stronger ships than the cog they rode in. The captain dropped anchor on the eastern side of the island, in what he called calm water, and sent them ashore in the boats.

Penelope and the other girls had clung to the sides of the boats as waves rocked them, threatening to capsize them. They were all soaked by the time they reached shore, where the novices huddled in a miserable little flock while one of the sailors headed for the nearest village to ask for a cart to carry the women.

Penelope settled on the sand to wait, for she felt the pains begin again. She didn't think they were birthing pains yet, but Godfrey worried so about her. The cart had been his idea, of course.

Then Kun, the enchantress, came ashore. She was as wet as the rest, for her strength lay in earth and not water magic, but she insisted she knew the island well, and the nearest village was further away than White Harbour, so they might as well walk.

Godfrey had the temerity to protest that Penelope could not walk so far in her condition, but something in her had rebelled at his coddling. She'd heaved herself to her feet, feeling an urge to move.

"But what if the cart comes and finds us gone?" Godfrey asked.

"Then it can come and get us," Kun said with a shrug. The afternoon sun shone, but her dark hair seemed to drink the light instead of reflecting it. Even Godfrey would not look at her for long before turning away.

Kun beckoned for the novices to follow her, and they made a strange procession. Penelope leaned on Godfrey's arm, for the knight's horse had remained aboard the ship and he walked with the rest of them.

They walked through the fields in the afternoon light, so the setting sun was in their eyes when they entered the wood. Penelope welcomed the cool darkness, but there were more than trees waiting for them. She heard the shouts, but couldn't see past the novices in front of her. She and Godfrey had fallen to the rear, so when one of the brigands circled around to attack them from behind, Godfrey wrenched his sword from its scabbard and charged the man.

More men stepped out of the trees to assist Godfrey's man, and for a moment, he was surrounded before they cut him down. It was done so quickly, so silently that he was dead before she was aware of what had happened.

Penelope felt magic billowing out from the enchantress, and she bit her lip to offer what little help she could. Then she saw into the men's minds. They wanted the girls, but more than that, they wanted to chase them as they ran, their desire building as they hunted. Penelope herself was dismissed as poor sport, but when one of the novices bolted, their fierce joy was almost unbearable as they leaped as one to follow her. Penelope fell to her knees.

Kun's magic engulfed them all, shaking the earth so hard no one remained standing but the enchantress herself.

One of the men fell near Penelope, and she was surprised to see he wore fine clothes. They all did. Brigandry evidently paid well on Beacon Isle.

Kun shouted something and the man before her began to shimmer, then shrink. He gave a horrible cry, but he grew smaller and smaller until Penelope could have cupped him in her hands. Then he shivered, throwing his cloak out wide and it caught the wind, buoying him up like wings. No, they were wings.

Penelope watched in amazement as the brigands turned into birds, which flew away.

Then pain engulfed her once more, and she knew that this pain was not the same as before. Her baby was coming, and she was helpless to stop her birthing blood from mingling with her husband's lifeblood on the road.

Nine

"I will not do this!" Margareta burst out. After being silent so long, her voice sounded strange in her ears. "I will not save them from a fate they so richly deserve. She should have killed them, not let them fly away. How dare they..."

Penelope's mouth dropped open in shock. "But an enchantress cannot use her power to kill. It is against the laws of their kind. If she does, she will be enslaved like the other djinn, who were once free to practice magic until they turned to evil."

Margareta would not be silenced. "So an enchantress who puts down a pack of rabid dogs who prey on women is punished, while the men get off lightly, with the gift of flight?"

"That was the enchantress's choice of punishment. I am sure Mistress Kun had her reasons. A lesser witch does not question an enchantress, for she understands far more than I ever will," Penelope faltered.

"Where is this enchantress now?" Margareta demanded.

"I do not know. I was busy with childbirth when she left and I did not see her again," Penelope replied.

So she could not question the enchantress, Margareta mused. But there was one person she could speak to, who would not be allowed to hold back information this time.

She stormed through the house to her father's solar. He had aged since she'd seen him last, though it had only been a few weeks. Right now, though, she didn't care if he looked twice his age.

"I won't do it. I won't stay silent. They deserve their fate," she said through gritted teeth.

"They're boys. Your brothers. Boys shouldn't be punished for pulling a prank. They weren't hurting anybody. Those novices were too easily frightened." Father dismissed her concerns with a wave of his hand.

"And what of the witch? Or Lady Penelope? Or Sir Godfrey, the knight they murdered?" Margareta demanded. "A man is dead. His wife a widow, his child fatherless. They demand justice."

Her father surveyed the study. "Yet I don't see them here. Just you."

Margareta slammed her fist into the table. "Yes, me. The daughter you duped into helping you free my dastardly brothers from a curse they

deserve."

"They killed a man who attacked them, Meg. There is no crime in that. They are my sons, and one day Beacon Isle will belong to them. In the meantime, they carry my justice from one end of the island to the other. Perhaps they might have overpowered the man, and brought him here to face justice instead of killing him outright, but there were a lot of women present who might have been in danger from the madman. If they were here, I could ask them, but they are not, and they will not return until the curse is broken. A curse you swore you would break."

"That was before I knew how much they deserved it!" Margareta cried. "If I break this curse, one day they will be masters of Beacon Isle, and heaven help the islanders when you are gone. There will be no justice, for they will be lords who take whatever they will, and no woman will be safe. I will not be a part of this, Father."

"So you will let your brothers remain birds forever, because you, a girl who has not been taught to rule like her brothers have from their infancy, think you know better?"

Margareta folded her arms across her chest. "Any village idiot knows better than to torment innocent women for their own amusement. I would do a far better job at ruling this island than any of my brothers."

"No woman can rule," Father scoffed. "That is why girls must marry. So their husband can rule their lands with the strength required to hold them, or they would soon lose them to conquest."

In the human world, Margareta knew this to be true, but beneath the waves, it was a different story. "Not my kind. Under the surface, women rule the oceans. And the men who think they are strong enough to challenge us for our domain die," she said fiercely.

The Master of Beacon Isle leaned back in his chair, considering her. "Very well. If you lift the curse on my sons, I will give you Beacon Isle as your dowry when you marry."

Margareta held his gaze, knowing the lie that lurked beneath his promise. Her kind did not marry, and no human male would survive long in her bed. But he would only need to survive long enough to claim her dowry, and Beacon Isle would be safe. Her brothers could never inherit.

"We have an accord," she said.

The Master was quick to follow up on what he thought was his advantage. "Indeed we do. See that you keep your promise and save my sons."

Mutely, Margareta nodded. If by breaking the curse, she could free Beacon Isle from the curse of her brothers, her silence was a small price to pay. One which would yield lands, a husband and maybe even the one thing she wanted most – a child like Melitta.

Ten

Later that evening, in the solitude of her chambers, Margareta took a knife and sliced the skin of her arm, letting the blood flow. She was a weak spellcaster with anything that wasn't water, and she wanted this spell to work. What might take another enchantress merely a drop of blood took much more from Margareta.

She wove her magic carefully, making sure the spell affected only herself. When she was done, silence settled over her tongue. There would be no mistakes or changes of heart this time. She would not, nay, could not speak until her brothers' curse broke and they returned to Beacon Isle. Until then, her voice would not be heard.

Not a word or a laugh or a single sound would pass her lips for more than six years, when fate intervened.

For a siren whose voice is never heard is hardly a siren at all. Maybe enough to make a man wonder whether she might make a suitable wife.

Eleven

Had Beacon Isle been this green the last time he was here? Erik wondered as the island came into view. He couldn't remember. Last time, he'd been too caught up in the sheer adventure of it all, his first sea voyage, his first journey at all. He'd had responsibilities then, too, which had taken much of his time. Armour did not polish itself and salt from the sea voyage had conspired to make his duties tenfold more difficult.

He'd learned a lot about the sea since then, and those who made their living on it. Enough to know how to keep his sword from rusting, and to wear leather armour, when he wore any at all. He was on a mission of peace, not war, and he was under strict instructions not to risk his life unnecessarily.

Just as his brother, Philip, had not risked his own in anything more ordinary than a sea voyage. A voyage that had both blessed and cursed Erik, for he alone had survived. He and a girl he swore he'd find.

Six years it had taken to convince his father to allow him to go to sea. Anything could have happened to her in that time. She might have died, or married, or run far away from Beacon Isle, but that was the last place he'd seen her, so that was where he would start his search.

That Beacon Isle was at the heart of other, stranger stories than his intrigued him. His father dismissed the tales as the fantasies of sailors embellished by nurses who wished to frighten children. Yet Erik knew something his father did not – he had his own dreams and memories to go on, the proof of his own eyes. A moment of foggy memory that would not leave him alone gave credence to all the tales the way nothing else could.

And yet...

Erik sighed. The tales told so many conflicting things, it was hard to make any sense of them. That was why he sought the source of such tales – and the library on Beacon Isle was famed far and wide. Why, it was said that some of the books from the library of the ancients, which burned a thousand years ago, had been salvaged and were kept even now in the priory at Beacon Isle. Not that he wanted scrolls from so far afield. He wanted the history of Beacon Isle itself and the waters surrounding it. Especially the waters...

Water he would have to cross if he was to find what he sought, Erik told himself, forcing himself to step across the gangplank to shore. There, that was not so difficult, he chided himself as his boots touched the cobbled surface of the dock.

He'd surprised himself with how easy it was. Weren't all seas the same water, after all? He'd sailed many of them in his thankless quest, but still he had no more answers than when he'd started. That's why Beacon Isle must hold the answers. Here his quest had begun, and here it would end, one way or the other. Either he would find the answers he sought, or he would be forced to agree with his father that whatever he'd seen in the water was nothing but an illusion invented by his own fevered brain.

Erik took a coin, tossed it into the air and caught it on the back of his hand. Heads and he was delusional; tails and he would find what he sought here. Erik lifted his hand, and cheered aloud when he did not see his father's engraved profile on the uppermost side of the coin. He would find something here, he was certain of it. If not her, then perhaps the book he wanted waited in the library.

Erik itched to begin his search, but he knew better. Politics demanded he present himself to the Master of Beacon Isle first, for he was his father's son, and his father had his own reasons for keeping the Master happy.

Aside from its value to Erik, Beacon Isle was one of the richest trading ports in the region, accepting goods from all corners of the globe and trading them far and wide. It was strategic to the defence of half a dozen countries that surrounded it, and it had its own navy that served Beacon Isle and acknowledged no king as its sovereign except the Master of Beacon Isle.

A Master, yet not a king. It even piqued Erik's curiosity how a man could hold such power without a crown. Almost as though there was more to Beacon Isle than anyone thought.

Calling his thanks to the captain for the ride, Erik set out across Harbour Town to reach the Master's house, and the priory beyond.

The town quickly dropped behind him as he ascended the hill where legend said one of the saints had founded the first priory on the site. The rude wooden huts that had once stood there were long gone, replaced by the edifice of white and grey stone that occupied the crown of the hill overlooking White Harbour. On a beautiful day such as this, it was a view fit for a king.

Erik stepped through the gate into the bailey, his rich clothing announcing his arrival before he could open his mouth.

Men set off for the port to bring his belongings while another asked for his name and ushered him into the great hall, where he was offered food and wine while he waited for the Master.

Bemused, Erik accepted the offer of wine, wondering how far afield the vintage had come from, for it was surely too cold for grapes on Beacon Isle. A cautious sip told him all he needed to know – the wine was not from grapes at all, but made with berries in the style made famous by a kingdom to the south of his father's that backed onto the mountains, and a particular favourite at his father's court. His father had hinted that a marriage between Erik and the king's only daughter would be advantageous for both kingdoms, but Erik had no intention of marrying a woman he'd never met. Life would include enough unhappiness without sharing it with a woman he didn't love.

"Prince Erik. It is an honour," a deep voice said. The man who entered the hall looked ancient, instead of the same age as Erik's own father. But no one else would walk into the great hall of Beacon Isle like a king granting a great favour to one of his subjects. This ageing nobleman was stronger than he appeared, for no weakling could hold the rich lands of Beacon Isle without even a crown to legitimise his claim to the neighbouring kingdoms.

Erik set his goblet on the table, turned and bowed. "Master Nicholas. I thought you would send one of your sons to greet me. I had no idea that you would take the time to meet me yourself. The honour is mine."

Master Nicholas's eyes clouded with something like grief. "My sons, like so many others, have gone on a long journey to seek redemption for their sins. I hope to see them home soon, but I fear I shall find them changed men, after such a long absence. Many years."

Erik murmured something appropriate about how proud he must be of his sons. While Master Nicholas waxed lyrical about his numerous sons and their even more numerous talents, Erik wondered what it would be like to undertake a crusade to free the Holy Land like Nicholas' sons evidently had. It seemed such a pointless business that one would surely have had to commit some truly grievous sins in order to require such lengthy reparation.

He debated whether Master Nicholas's boys had done something particularly bad, or whether the fervour of others had caught them up like so many other young noblemen. Surely the latter.

"And what brings you here to my humble isle?" Master Nicholas asked.

Erik managed a smile. "Why, a quest of my own. I have developed a singular interest in the history of the region, and I've found a large gap in the history of Beacon Isle. Considering the fame of your library, I naturally assumed the information I sought would be here."

Master Nicholas laughed, though it sounded hollow. He knew as well as Erik that the one thing Erik's father, and in fact all the neighbouring kings, wanted to know, was which king had last held sovereignty over Beacon Isle...and how, if at all, he had lost it. Such a secret would surely be within the archives here on Beacon Isle.

"I will see to it that you have a research assistant who is an expert in all of our library collections, the day after tomorrow. First, you must rest from your journey, and tomorrow is our harvest feast, so you must join us. I will introduce you to my daughter at the feast, too."

Erik suppressed a sigh. What was it with men once they had a daughter? The moment she was old enough, they all wanted to marry the poor girl off, and they all looked eagerly at him as the prospective husband. As if a good marriage began with a desire to please the girl's father, and not the girl herself. When he found the girl he wanted, he would do everything within his power to please the girl. She was the one he intended to share his life with, after all.

He made noises that he hoped sounded eager, then escaped the Master as quickly as he could without being rude.

Twelve

Penelope finished tying the laces of Margareta's gown. "There," she breathed, standing back to admire her handiwork.

"She looks beautiful, Mama. Like a princess," six-year-old Melitta squealed, clapping her hands. "Can I be Harvest Queen, too, when I'm all grown up?"

"She's not the Harvest Queen, sweetheart," Penelope said. "The Harvest Queen wears gold, not blue. Lady Margareta is the Lady of Beacon Isle, and one day she'll be the Mistress of the whole island."

"What about me?" the child demanded.

Margareta couldn't hide her smile. When she was that age, she'd admired the village girls chosen to be Harvest Queens, and wished that some day she might be one of them. Now, she knew better. The girl chosen to lord it over her fellows at each Harvest Festival never lacked for partners when the dancing started, and she never failed to find a husband before the first winter snows. From the moment the blessed crown of flowers touched the Queen's head, she became the sole focus of every man present. For the blessing was one of fertility...and any man who could win the Queen's affections that night was certain to sire a child on her, hence the rapid weddings.

She remembered her brothers being among previous queens' suitors. As a child, she'd seen the uncrowned queens marrying other men, and she'd pitied her brothers for being rejected. Now, she realised that wasn't the case – the girls had been hurriedly married off to save what honour they had left after her brothers had finished with them.

That wouldn't be the fate of tonight's Queen, however – Margareta was certain of that. Queen Gerda was safe from her cursed brothers, and well known to be walking out with young Kay, a boy orphaned by the very same shipwreck that Prince Philip and his entourage had died in. Margareta hoped she'd see Gerda and Kay reach a marriage accord tonight, and that the competition of other men wanting her hand would spur the boy into action before he lost the girl.

"Perhaps when you are older, you will be Harvest Queen, and I shall make you a beautiful dress in gold," Penelope said to her daughter.

"No! Blue like Lady Margareta!" the child shrieked.

Penelope shook her head. "Your spirit is all spit and fire, child. If you are ever Harvest Queen, the boys will burn the city for you, thinking it is Midsummer and not harvest at all." She dropped her voice lower so only Margareta could hear. "I already told you, the competition will frighten the boy off. I'll wager you the first piece of velvet off my loom that he is too cowardly to ask the girl. He doesn't think he's worthy of her."

Margareta had to admit Penelope had an edge on her, being able to read the boy's thoughts and all, but Margareta wanted to believe some happiness would come of tonight's feast. Besides, watching the Harvest Queen while she was stuck at the high table, where no man would dare ask her to dance, would provide some amusement in an otherwise tedious evening.

"Let us go," Penelope said, straightening the veil she wore over her hair. To the two veiled novices who'd appeared in the doorway, she added, "Make sure she's in bed as soon as she's finished her supper. I don't want her sneaking downstairs to the feast again."

The novices murmured their agreement.

To the sound of Melitta screaming about wanting to come to the ball, too, Penelope and Margareta made their way down to the great hall. Penelope's dove grey gown and matching veil marked her as a widow, though she was long since finished with her mourning period. Margareta's blue gown glowed like the sky above, setting off her curved figure to perfection. When she arrived at the door to the great hall, silence fell without anyone needing to announce her name. The breath caught in every male throat as each and every man present desired to possess her, and every feminine gasp spoke volumes about how much they wished they could be her.

Margareta did not need the Harvest Queen's crown or Penelope's mind-reading magic to know these things – it was plain in the expression on every face. Even when her tongue was silent, a siren's body sang a song so enticing no human could resist.

Ignoring all the eyes on her, Margareta led the way to the high table. She paid little heed to the men already seated at her father's right and left hands as she headed for her accustomed seat at the far end of the table. She shared her small bench with Penelope, because after her, Penelope was the second highest ranking woman in the room.

The feast itself passed much like any other – everyone ate too much and drank more, until the volume of their collective voices rose to a roar that echoed around the room. When the roar approached what Margareta

thought was its crescendo, her father rose to announce the Harvest Queen, who would open the dancing.

Clad in the traditional saffron-coloured gown worn by Harvest Queens for as long as Margareta could remember, Gerda approached the dais and dropped a deep curtsey, letting her skirt puddle around her as she'd no doubt practised. Father, as Master of Beacon Isle, laid the blessed crown of flowers on the girl's head and bade her to rise as royalty.

The moment the crown touched her hair, the atmosphere in the room changed from the sated merriment after a feast to charged anticipation.

"We're not the only ones betting on who the little queen chooses to be her king," Penelope whispered.

If it weren't for her spell of silence, Margareta would have had to smother a laugh. A lot of young men had turned their eyes on Gerda, as though seeing the girl for the first time. Poor Kay, who'd sat beside her at the feast, now stared into his mug of ale as though he couldn't bear to see how beautiful Gerda looked tonight.

The Master gave the order and the tables and benches were swept aside to make space for the highlight of the evening – the Harvest Ball.

Gerda and her golden gown were soon hidden among a crowd of eager young men, while other couples lined up for a country dance. Margareta longed to be among them, but her father would never allow her to dance, because there was no knowing when her siren side might take over and decide the poor boy needed to die instead of dance with her.

So Margareta watched and kept Penelope company, for no man would think of asking the widow of a saint to do something as frivolous as dancing, or so Penelope said.

"How fares young Kay?" Penelope asked.

Margareta pointed at the boy, who sat moodily in the corner with his ale.

Penelope clapped her hands. "You'll be taking me out on the boat for sure. I hope we'll have fine weather tomorrow, because I fancy a trip out on the ocean!"

So would Margareta, she admitted to herself. To be out on the waves, breathing in the salt spray and listening to the swish of the hull cutting smoothly through the sea, instead of the smoky air in the hall full of music and shouting and the stomp of booted feet.

"Lady, would you do me the honour of joining me in this dance?" the man to Margareta's right asked, extending his hand.

Margareta shook her head and Penelope piped up, "The Lady Margareta is under a vow of silence until her brothers return."

"But that won't stop you dancing, will it, my lady?" the man persisted. "Your father said –"

"Her father wants his sons to return just as much as Lady Margareta," Penelope said smoothly, cutting the man off.

Margareta dared to look into his eyes. They lit up with his eager grin, as if he truly didn't believe she could refuse him. She lowered her gaze, frowned, then shook her head emphatically.

"Meg, be a good girl. Go dance with the king's envoy," the Master ordered, stabbing a finger at the dance floor.

She shot her father a look of surprise. Didn't he care what happened to the ambassador? What if something happened and her true nature took over and...

"Dance, girl!" the Master commanded.

Unable to refuse, Margareta laid her hand on the envoy's proffered arm, and allowed herself to be led onto the dance floor. She shot Penelope an imploring look, begging her friend to keep an eye on her thoughts and that of the ambassador.

Margareta glimpsed Penelope's grave nod before she and the ambassador were whirled away into the organised chaos that was a country dance.

Thirteen

The moment she stepped into the great hall, Erik knew his search was over before it had even started. She was here – the girl in his dreams. Or at least he thought she was.

He didn't remember her having curves like that, or perhaps he'd been too young to notice. Her dark hair was hidden mostly under a veil, but a rebellious tendril had escaped. She moved like a stately lady, which indeed she was, if she was the Master's daughter. The grey-clad widow at her side looked like her companion or her chaperone, Erik wasn't sure.

The girl sat beside him, close enough to reach out and touch, though he didn't dare. She shared a bench with her chaperone, he judged, when the widow shot him a shrewd glance that seemed to size up his very soul.

He met the widow's gaze, willing her to believe that his intentions toward the girl were honourable. How could they not be? He'd come here to find her, and here she was, not a foot from him!

Erik scarcely tasted a bite of his meal as he struggled to keep his breathing even. He wanted to blurt out everything to her, everything that had kept him away for the last six years and what brought him here now, but every time he tried to say something to her, his voice died in his throat. What did a man say to the woman of his dreams, when he saw her for the first time in six years?

And so he waited for her to break the silence. A silence he should not have noticed, amid the noise of a hall full of people making merry to celebrate the harvest, and yet the silence stretched in his mind until it lay like a great gulf between them.

The tables were cleared away to make space for dancing, and Erik's heart leaped. A ball! At home in his father's court, the ladies would form up and dance, spinning around one another like flower petals blown by the wind, before coming together as the complex pattern drew them in at the end of the dance.

Erik held his breath for a moment in eager anticipation as the first girls stepped out into the cleared space. But they were followed soon after by men, forming up in couples like no ball Erik had ever been to. Only then did it strike him that none of those present were nobles – the hall was full of common people, dressed in such bright colours that it hadn't occurred to

him to look more closely at their clothes. This was a prosperous place indeed if even the peasants' clothes were as coloured as those of his father's courtiers.

He waited for the girl beside him to join the dance, but she remained resolutely in her seat. No partner, perhaps?

Before he'd truly thought the words through, he blurted out a clumsy invitation for her to dance with him.

Her eyes met his – two blue jewels that seemed to hold the depths of the ocean inside them. But the one thing that they didn't hold was any spark of recognition. She shook her head, which made the grey widow pipe up in the girl's support.

Erik's heart ached at the thought that this wasn't the girl he was looking for – how could she not recognise him, when he knew her instantly? – but his ever-optimistic imagination ventured that if she had changed in the intervening time, so had he, and it would take time for her to remember him. Just because he hadn't been able to forget the shipwreck and how she'd saved him from it, didn't mean she had been similarly affected. Perhaps she had endured many shipwrecks, and rescued many helpless boys, and there was nothing special about him at all.

No, he'd felt it then and he knew it now. There was something between them, a connection that once made could not be broken. He felt it in his bones.

The grey widow would not stop him from dancing with her.

Erik countered her arguments as to why the girl shouldn't dance, and just as he felt he had the upper hand, a male voice cut in.

Master Nicholas ordered the girl to dance with him.

The girl's eyes widened, and she looked affronted at her father. She was no dutiful daughter, this one. If not for her vow of silence, the girl would have given her father a piece of her undoubtedly strong mind.

The Master either ignored or dismissed her rebellious glance, and repeated his command.

With an expression that said her father would rue this later, the girl rose gracefully, every inch a veritable queen as she took Erik's hastily proffered arm.

The dancers parted and bowed to allow them to take their place at the head of the formation. The musicians faltered, then began anew, hesitantly

at first, then more boldly as the girl stepped across the divide to place her palm against Erik's.

Heat flared between his hand and hers, surprising him. She should have been cold, icy, not warm to the touch. Perhaps he was wrong, and she wasn't...

Deep blue eyes sucked at his soul as they whirled among the other dancers, assessing him as frankly as though she were the Master himself.

Erik stumbled, forgetting the steps, nearly sending them crashing into another couple.

Her arms grew rigid around him, steering him bodily away from the others for all the world as though she had the strength to lift him off his feet. Or pluck him from the ocean into a boat.

Now it was Erik's turn to stare at her. Either she was, or she wasn't.

They moved apart, as required by the steps of the dance, and Erik was forced to partner three other girls before he could approach her again.

"Do you remember me?" he asked urgently. "That day in the water?"

She grimaced as he trod on her foot.

Erik opened his mouth to apologise, but she brought her slippered heel down so hard on his instep all that came out was a pained yelp.

She broke free of his hold, weaving expertly through the dancers until she reached the edge of the room. An imperious wave of her hand brought a servant with a goblet. The girl took the goblet, turned on her bone-breaking heel, and strode out of the great hall, with the grey widow hard on her heels.

Disappointment welled up in Erik's throat. If he hadn't been so clumsy, she might have answered his question. Then he'd know if she truly was the right one.

With considerably less grace than the girl, Erik made his way through the dancers and back to the dais, where he slumped to the bench beside Master Nicholas's chair.

Gesturing for a servant to fill his cup with wine, Erik said to Master Nicholas, "Your daughter is certainly a very spirited girl."

Master Nicholas drained his cup. "That she is. Break her, and she's yours. Consider her a gift."

Erik's mouth dropped open, and he hastened to close it. Break her? She would outlast the strongest granite, Erik was certain. For a wave might break against a rock, but no man could master the ocean. Least of all him.

"My father would welcome a marriage alliance between his kingdom and yours," Erik managed to say. He bowed to the Master and bade him a good night before heading up to his chambers.

It wasn't until he was alone in bed that Erik realised he hadn't even asked for her name.

Fourteen

The moment the door to the great hall closed behind Penelope, Margareta slowed her steps. Her feet hurt after being stomped on by that boor. What had possessed him to ask her to dance when he was so abysmal at dancing, and he didn't even know the steps?

The water in the ewer splashed over the side with the force of the waves Margareta's fury had created. She forced herself to calm down, at least a little.

"From the moment he entered the room, he fell under your spell," Penelope said softly. "He could think of no one and nothing else but you."

That made him no different to any other man present tonight, Margareta knew. The lure of a siren was almost impossible to resist, which was why she'd refused to dance with him. What had her father been thinking, telling her to dance with him? If she killed some king's ambassador, there could be war. Already she seethed at his touch.

"I didn't read your father's thoughts, so I don't know the answer to that," Penelope replied. "I was too busy keeping an eye on you and your lover boy."

She would never take that boor as her lover, Margareta fumed. His thoughts had undoubtedly been filled with all the things he dreamed of doing to her if he could get her alone and naked. Margareta's money was on him being the forceful sort, who dreamed of pinning her to a bed beneath his weight and forcing himself between her legs. Marginally better than the ones who delighted in the dream of forcing her to her knees to pleasure him with her mouth.

"Neither of those," Penelope said cheerfully. "His thoughts were quite refreshing, really. Yes, they were of you, but mostly he focussed on your face. And the light was sort of blue, like you were under water. There's something different about him. Not that it really matters. You probably won't see him again. He's here on some sort of quest, but he keeps those thoughts hidden. At least, he did last night, when you were there to distract him." Penelope dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Judging by the tone of his thoughts, he'd make a more attentive lover than most men. He was genuinely sorry when he stepped on your feet."

Not as sorry as Margareta intended to make him if he ever touched her feet again, she resolved grimly.

Penelope laughed. "I'm sure you'll think of some truly diabolical torture for the man. You can tell me what you've decided in the morning. I am going to return to my chambers, where I hope the sisters have managed to get Melitta to sleep, and where I intend to do the same."

Margareta wished her friend a silent good night. When she was certain Penelope was far enough away, Margareta left her room and headed for the beach. A swim in the cool water would do her good. She could dive down deep and change the currents to her heart's content until she felt better. Damn her father for putting her too close to that man. It was almost as though he wanted her to kill the ambassador.

No, surely not.

Fifteen

By the following morning, Margareta was back to her usual sunny self as she sat in the brightly lit bower with Penelope. As had become their custom, Penelope worked on her weaving, while Margareta busied herself copying some of the older, crumbling manuscripts from the library before they became entirely unreadable.

Father often commented that writing was a man's job, and not suitable for a lady. The priory had a group of monks whose sole occupation was to illuminate the manuscripts they found in the library, as Margareta knew well, but she'd watched the monks at their work, and it left a lot to be desired. Oh, their books were beautiful enough, written in lovely letters and illustrated with the most exquisite pictures, but for every manuscript they copied, another dozen crumbled to dust, they were so slow. Completing a single page could take days, the way the monks did it, and on her father's death, this library, like all of Beacon Isle, would be hers. And she did not want to lose any of the texts it contained.

So, while the monks made beautiful books, she collected the scrolls they left behind, and transcribed what she could decipher. Her pages were plain but readable, which was more than she could say about the originals, and if the monks wanted to turn her work into beautiful books, at least they'd still have the text from the source to go by, instead of it being lost altogether.

One winter, when the harbour had completely iced over and kept all the ships away for weeks, Margareta had run out of ink. Bored beyond belief, she'd undertaken to reorganise the library. Through the centuries, the books and scrolls had been placed on shelves based on the date they were bought or last read. That meant the earliest scrolls had crumbled together into indecipherable fragments that Margareta lacked the patience to piece together, but it also appeared that some of the older scrolls had been removed from their original shelves and shoved back into pigeonholes which were already occupied by more recent manuscripts, making a mess that had only worsened through the centuries.

Two days after she'd finished her Herculean task, the harbour ice had finally cracked and more ink had arrived.

Margareta had intended to write a document, summarising her filing system so that anyone could easily find what they sought, but in the course

of her cleaning, she'd found so many scrolls in need of copying before their contents disappeared altogether that she'd had other priorities for her time. Even now, she fought against time to preserve all of them.

Most days, she was fascinated by what she read. Stories about wars fought in lands she'd never heard of, with exotic names and all sorts of strange animals, or accounts of men and events she couldn't even begin to understand. Senates and votes and pharaohs and all manner of strange words came up in these manuscripts.

Today's scroll tried her patience. Not only had the writer failed to put spaces between the Latin words so that the reader might know where one word ended and the next began, but the words themselves left a foul taste in her mouth. The unknown writer who had first penned the words believed that all the ills of the world could be cured if only husbands controlled their wives, who were apparently all violent, uncontrollable creatures. So either they could be controlled, or they couldn't, Margareta fumed. She was tempted to drop this scroll in the fire and be done with it. A violent, uncontrollable creature...why, she hadn't attacked anyone yet!

The servant who entered the room was a welcome interruption.

"Mistress, the Master asks for some scrolls from the library, which he says only you can find."

Margareta glanced at Penelope.

Penelope waved her away. "Go, help your father. I'm poor company anyway. One moment, I am so close to getting this cloth right, and the next...it falls apart and I must try again. If I hadn't seen that finished piece of velvet with my own eyes, I'd swear it wasn't possible. Perhaps I should stick to silk."

Margareta smiled. She knew Penelope would never give up. The woman was as gifted with a needle as she was with a loom, and if anyone could create a new cloth by herself, it was Penelope.

"Bring back something interesting this time, instead of that dry old history scroll. Knights and dragons and...violent, uncontrollable creatures," Penelope called after Margareta.

Margareta chuckled silently to herself. These six years of silence would have been impossible but for Penelope's mind-reading talents. As she marched purposefully through the corridors of her father's house and into the priory, Margareta resolved to deal with this errand as quickly as

possible, because she knew exactly which book to bring back to share with Penelope.

Sixteen

A servant brought Erik breakfast, along with the welcome message that Master Nicholas had not only granted his request to use the library today, but he'd given him an assistant to help him navigate their collection of books. Erik was under no illusions that the assistant wouldn't report his every move back to the Master, but it was of little concern. He could easily hide his father's mission under the cover of his own project. Master Nicholas would think him crazy, which he undoubtedly was, and leave him to his own devices.

Erik wolfed down his breakfast, dressed and demanded to be shown the way to the famous library. The maidservant lost no time in leading the way – Erik had trouble keeping up with the girl as she trotted through the richly decorated passageways. It wasn't until they reached the bare corridor that marked the start of the priory that she slowed down. Erik thought he heard her breathe a sigh of relief as she weaved through the monks. Almost as though she feared walking through the corridors of the house proper. Or was he the one who scared her?

The girl abruptly stopped, then spun on her heel to stand beside the doorway instead of passing through it. She dropped a deep curtsey. "The library, sir." She dashed off before he could thank her.

Erik stared after her for a moment before giving himself a shake. He had his own mystery to solve – he didn't need to know what frightened the maids of Beacon Isle.

He stepped through the doorway and had to stop. He'd entered what might have been just another passage, if it weren't lined from floor to ceiling with shelves full of books. Erik couldn't suppress a grin. This was what he was here for.

Selecting a leather spine at random, he pulled a book from the shelf. The pages were filled with strange symbols, interspersed with letters he recognised. Erik laughed. Trust Beacon Isle to keep their books in some sort of code, indecipherable to all but those who lived here. Maybe an assistant would be useful after all.

An assistant who didn't appear to be anywhere in the library. Erik strolled between the shelves, not sure where to start. When he reached the end of the corridor, he realised he'd been mistaken – the biggest library he'd ever seen

was merely the antechamber to the real, much more massive collection that filled a chamber easily as big as the great hall itself. Some shelves were divided into pigeonholes occupied by scrolls instead of birds, while others were nigh as tall as him to accommodate huge books that would take two men to lift.

A table sat in the middle of the room, as large as one of the feasting tables in the hall below, dwarfing the stack of books that lay at its head.

"Uh, hello?" Erik called.

From behind the stack of books, which were taller than he'd thought, a figure rose to her feet.

Erik's heart leaped as he recognised the lady he'd danced with last night. The Master's daughter, whose name he still did not know.

"Beg pardon, my lady, but your father told me to meet my assistant here, as I'll be doing some research about the island's history in your remarkable library. Can you tell me where he might be?" Erik ventured.

The girl's eyes grew flinty. She picked up the hefty stack of books, thrust them at his chest so hard she nearly knocked him over, then stalked out of the library without a word.

Erik set the books down on the table, wondering how such a slight girl had had the strength to lift such a heavy load.

There was still no sign of the promised assistant, so he sat down and flicked open the first book.

He found a list of ships, along with their date of arrival, cargo, and duty paid on that cargo. They dated from the previous century.

A quick examination of the other books in the pile revealed they all contained information about the history of the isle.

Had the Master given him his own daughter to be a research assistant? No wonder the lady was angry at being assigned a task that surely should have been given to a servant.

"Thank you," Erik called after her, but he doubted she heard. Even if she did, she certainly didn't return, so Erik set to work.

Seventeen

This could only end badly. A polite ambassador who did his best to charm her spelled trouble for her and for himself, Margareta knew. Her father couldn't possibly have meant for her to work closely with him as his assistant. Why, the ambassador wouldn't last the week. She'd already seen that look in his eyes that told her he was under her spell, and not only was he less boorish away from the dance floor, but she could feel her heart softening toward him. If she hardened her heart to him like any other man, he might stand a chance. But if she let him win her over, maybe even try to seduce her a little, the ambassador was a dead man, and whatever king he served would want to know why.

And whatever he thought about the matter, Margareta knew that her father was no longer capable of leading the island to war, let alone victory.

Margareta didn't often question her father any more, and not just because she maintained her vow of silence. She'd seen him deteriorate from the strong man she remembered, revered and feared as a child, to a shadow of himself. Oh, some days, like at the Harvest Festival, he covered his thinning hair with a horsehair wig and dressed to outshine even the richest merchants. But others...Margareta sighed.

Her father had taken to his bed today, much the worse for last night's wine, and he refused to see anyone. Margareta was the exception, for no one could keep her out. Not even her father on days like this.

The moment he saw her, he sat up, leaving his bedcap on the pillow. "Have they returned? Do you bring word?" he asked eagerly.

Margareta shook her head. No, her brothers had not returned. She hadn't yet broken the curse.

His face crumpled. Some days he dissolved into tears, but today wasn't one of them. Instead, his face twisted into a snarl. "Bring them back. You must bring them back. Without my sons, the isle will be defenceless against all those kings who fancy my island. Not least of all that sneaky ambassador who's rooting around for his king. He'll never get what he's looking for. See that you help him with the books, for the sooner he's off the island, the better. You'll take care of him, won't you?"

Margareta's heart sank. When her father was having a bad day like this one, she could refuse him nothing. So she nodded dutifully, praying that the

ambassador would leave before he came to harm.

Eighteen

Every day for a week, Margareta set a stack of books on the table for the ambassador, then left him to his reading. After the way he'd looked and spoken to her that first day, she didn't dare to spend more than a few minutes in his company. If she lingered, he would give in to the desires she could read clearly through his eyes, and when he did, he would die.

Much safer to let him read the port logs than to meet his gaze and wonder what it would feel like to surrender to her siren desires. Her father made them sound like such terrible things, but anything you didn't want to stop doing surely resulted in a great deal of pleasure. How could that be so terrible?

Yet every time the ambassador bade her good morning, thanking her for the books and wishing her a pleasant day, she longed to linger. The only thing that stopped her was the stack of ledgers she'd handed to him, and the sheer boredom she'd experienced on the rare occasions she'd copied one out.

Why anyone wanted to know which ships had touched at the island a hundred years ago, she wasn't sure, but she had no intention of keeping him company while he read books that would put any normal man to sleep.

Yet he certainly didn't sleep, as evident by the pages of notes he scrawled each day. Margareta had glanced at them, but his writing was harder to read than the books she copied. What she could decipher appeared to be records of ships lost near the island. The list looked long after three days, and grew with each new day.

It seemed to Margareta that merchants would avoid what appeared to be such a dangerous trading port, but a quick peek at the harbour outside told her otherwise. Only on the rare winters when the ocean froze over entirely was White Harbour ever empty. It was almost full today.

The ambassador didn't seem to notice, though. He was too intent on reading the books she'd given him yesterday.

Margareta thumped a new stack onto the table beside him and turned to leave.

To linger was to lose control, which she couldn't do, Margareta reminded herself.

He caught her arm, and though she tried to pull away, his grip on her wrist tightened.

"Please, my lady, stay. Shipping logs are all very good and well, but they're also boring. They say this ship carried this cargo, or was lost on this date, but none say how the ship was lost."

Margareta shrugged. Ships were lost. Such was the fate of men who thought to control the ocean. She yanked out of his grip and glared at him.

To her surprise, he looked suitably contrite. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, my lady. It's just that I don't know your name and if I didn't catch you, I would lose my chance for another day. You see, your father promised me an assistant, but all he seems to want to give me is you." He caught the anger in her eyes. "Not that the books you've found for me haven't been a great help – they have, I swear. It's just that I want to know more, and you are the only other person who comes here. As the lady of the house, I'm sure you know who I should ask for help instead?"

Margareta considered sweeping out of the room, but the pleading look in his eyes plucked at her heart in such a way that she relented. She perched on a bench, placed her hands on her lap, and lifted her eyebrows in mute query. What exactly did he want to know?

He leaned forward. "You see, I want to know why the ships were lost. Was it storms? Pirates? A battle with enemy ships? Sea monsters?"

Margareta bit her lip, wishing she could laugh. What would the ambassador say if he knew that she was the only kind of monster that lived in the sea? She shrugged again.

"Have you ever seen a sea monster?" he asked eagerly. "I've heard some of them can take the form of a beautiful woman who entices sailors to their deaths."

Margareta gasped – could he read her thoughts? Quickly, she schooled her expression into one of bewilderment, but it was too late. He'd seen her surprise.

"You have, haven't you?" he guessed. "I knew it! It is you. You're the same girl who was aboard the *Golden Eagle* when she sank. You're the girl who survived."

Margareta wished she could tell him what a fool he sounded, saying such things. She was the sea monster who had survived, not some weak-as-water maiden who needed to be rescued from the ocean, of all things. Her eyes narrowed. And how did he know such a thing, after all this time?

"I was the boy who was aboard the *Golden Eagle*, too," he continued. "We were in one of the ship's boats that made it to shore, except when I woke up, you were gone. I'm Erik." He held out his hand to her, palm up.

This ambassador was the squire? Margareta squinted at him, trying to see the boy in the well-built man before her. Maybe around the eyes and the mouth she could see a faint resemblance, but...

Her father had told her he'd searched for the boy, but found no trace of him anywhere on the island. It was as though he'd leaped back in the water to drown with the prince he'd served. Her father had suggested that the boy had never existed at all, until Margareta almost believed it. Sirens didn't suffer from the same maladies as sailors at sea for too long, though, so Margareta knew the boy had been real. So if he'd survived and this was him...that put him in a different light. He wasn't just some neighbouring king's ambassador. He was...a friend, of sorts. One she'd mourned who wasn't dead. Who wouldn't die here, no matter what she had to do to ensure it, Margareta swore.

She realised he'd continued speaking, and she shook her head, focussing on his words. Only her father knew she'd saved the squire, and he would never have told a soul, for it would mean telling people he had a siren for a daughter. So the only other people who knew were herself and the squire. He had to be the same boy.

"I had to go home to report Philip's death. My father was devastated at first, and then...well, there was so much to do. Learning to be a squire and one day a knight is one thing, but learning to be a prince, and politics, and how to rule a country..." Erik shook his head. "It's taken me this long to find my way back here, but I have to know. Do you have any books about sea monsters in these waters?"

All her parents' warnings about secrecy screamed at her to stop, and show the man nothing. And yet...something about him whispered to her that he was different – just as she'd known he was the day she saved him from the sea.

Perhaps it was time to find out what humans did know about her kind, so she could make sure they didn't learn more. Maybe they knew more than she gave them credit for. Her father certainly seemed to know plenty. Maybe he'd learned it all from a book in this very library. A book she could also learn from, so that one day she might manage to control her monstrous

nature and not worry about how she might kill someone without meaning to. Maybe she could work out how not to kill Erik.

She regarded Erik for a long moment. He already owed her his life, if he truly was the squire she'd saved. Perhaps he could help her, and in some small way repay his debt.

Margareta winked at him, then set off for the section on myths and legends for the first time in what felt like forever.

Nineteen

Had she actually winked at him? The frosty maiden who hated him? Oh, not that she didn't have good reason to do so – she surely did, being forced to spend her time in the library with him instead of doing...whatever it was ladies did all day. Knit? Sew? Spin? He had no sisters and he could scarcely remember his mother, so Erik had never seen what highborn ladies did when no men were around. Surrounded by servants, they didn't need to do anything, but he couldn't imagine this girl sitting still and doing nothing for very long. She was as restless as the ocean. Erik had half expected her to open her mouth and shout at him a few times during their conversation, but she evidently took her vow of silence very seriously. In his memories, she was certainly no mute, and she understood him just fine, so her brothers must be very important to her.

And why not? They were family. Surely the girl loved her brothers, as all good girls did, and it would be a great loss to her whole family if they never returned from their holy crusade. Many others had perished, or disappeared, never to be heard from again, but he didn't dare say such things to her. The intelligence that shone through her eyes meant she probably already knew, and if she did not, he would not be cruel enough to tell her. Besides, she'd already worked one miracle when she saved him – another might not be as impossible for her as it would for ordinary people.

She returned with two leather buckets of scrolls, that Erik helped her to set on the table. She unrolled the first one on the table, and Erik was mesmerised by the detailed drawing of a sea serpent, wrapping its massive coils around a sailing ship amid fierce waves. It was a monster, all right.

A fleeting image of blue scales on a creature easily as wide around as he himself, racing through the water beside him, passed through his mind, as if it was only yesterday he'd seen it. Had he seen a sea serpent? Is that what had brought him to the surface when he'd drowned? Or had the creature been a mermaid, like he'd dreamed? Whatever it had been, the creature had been doing the girl's bidding. That he knew for certain, for he'd heard her commanding the ocean itself. And a woman who could command the ocean in a world that relied on ships for trade was worth more than gold, jewels and the highest pedigree.

"Do you get many of these here?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

Her expression was impassive. Then she sighed.

She pulled a blank sheet of parchment toward her, picking up his quill with the ease of one who was familiar with writing, dipped it expertly in the ink, before scratching out the words:

Too cold. Serpents prefer warmer waters.

"Like most snakes," Erik mused. "But the ocean here is full of fish, and seals and maybe other creatures, too."

She nodded slowly. He got the impression she was waiting for him to continue.

Emboldened, he asked, "My lady, are there mermaids in these waters?"

The quill appeared in her fingers once more, flying across the parchment:

Don't be a fool. Mermaids don't exist outside of stories.

Her dark eyes held his. Mesmerising, that's what she was.

Would her gaze be equally cold if he kissed her?

Erik shook the idea from his head. If she was truly as powerful as he remembered, to kiss her would be to take his very life in his hands. But, by God, how much he wanted to. Even if it was the last thing he did, he would die a happy man.

She broke his gaze, turned on her heel, and marched out of the library.

Erik sighed. He'd been going so well, and then, like the bumbling fool he was, he'd made a mistake that sent her away again. But at least he'd managed to persuade her to show him some new scrolls that didn't mention a word of how many measures of wheat were aboard a ship when it sank.

Erik returned to the scrolls, which were filled with drawings that his eyes didn't see. Instead, his mind was fixed on her ocean-coloured eyes, and how they might light up if he kissed her.

Twenty

For the first time in his life, female voices arguing woke Erik. As his last dream faded, he realised he only heard one voice, but it was arguing loudly enough for two.

"I still don't see what you need me for. I am so close to getting the cloth right, I might have it finished this week. Instead, you want me to wake some man when you could easily do it yourself. You don't even need to touch him. Just throw a bucket of water over him, or whack him with a book, or..."

Erik jumped to his feet and met the annoyed gaze of the grey widow, who folded her arms across her chest.

"See?" the woman said. "He's awake. You don't need me. I'll go find someone to fetch food for him to break his fast."

A hand grasped the widow's sleeve, and Erik realised the girl stood behind her, using the widow for a shield. From him.

Pain smote his heart. "I'm sorry if I frightened you, my lady. The books you gave me yesterday were so interesting I stayed here late into the night to finish reading them. I must have fallen asleep on the table. My apologies if my snoring made you fear there was a monster in your library. I swear to you I mean you no harm. I am just a man."

The widow snorted. "Lady Margareta isn't frightened by much, sir. But a man who swears to do no harm had best keep his word, or evil will befall him. That I promise you."

Don't harm my charge or you will answer to me, Erik translated in his head.

"I spoke the truth. I mean her no harm. Both yourself and Lady Margareta are safe with me, Mistress...?"

"Lady Penelope," the widow supplied. She offered her hand, and Erik kissed it lightly. She lowered her voice so that only he could hear. "You should probably shave before you kiss her. She's not used to stubble."

Erik's hand flew to his face. Sure enough, he did need to shave. Muttering something about needing to wash, he hurried back to his chamber.

Twenty-One

Penelope's disapproval weighted heavily on Margareta. Penelope simply didn't understand the risks inherent in what Margareta was. If she touched the man, she could harm him.

"You danced with him just fine at the Harvest Ball," Penelope said. "Touched his hand and everything, so don't tell me there wasn't skin contact. And if he really is the boy you knew all those years ago, you definitely didn't hurt him then."

Margareta shook her head. Penelope could never understand. She was human, and –

"So are you!" Penelope exploded. "As human as I am! All right, you swim more often than most, but what's a little magic, when it's in your blood? There is no law that says you're not allowed to love, or touch people or...do any of the things normal people do! How many people have you killed?"

Margareta knew as well as Penelope did that the answer was none.

"You've saved one man's life, and killed no one. That makes you pretty safe to be around, in my opinion. Why don't you just let things happen the way they should, and worry about the consequences later?" Penelope asked.

If one of the consequences was Erik's death, Margareta didn't want to just let things happen. She wanted to protect him, not kill him.

"Well, he wants to protect you almost as much as he wants to kiss you, so that's a good start," Penelope said.

Kiss her? He wanted more than that. He wanted what every man wanted, Margareta was certain.

"Perhaps," Penelope said, "but that's not what he keeps thinking about. Not even what he dreams about. The only thing I've seen in his thoughts is visions of him kissing you. His eyes are fixed on your face. Except for the moment he first saw you, when he looked at your whole body, his focus is your eyes. Apparently, that's how you'll tell him whether his kiss is as perfect as he plans it to be."

A perfect kiss? Was there such a thing? The very idea intrigued Margareta. What would it be like to press her lips against Erik's and...

NO!

Margareta forced the thought from her mind. A kiss could lead to more and it was immodest to have such desires. If her father knew, he would only say it was her siren nature coming to the fore. No human girl would have such desires.

"Your father is a prude. Most girls dream about their first kiss, the same way he does about you. You could do worse, you know," Penelope said.

Of course she could. She could kill him.

"Just as long as you get the kind of kiss other girls only dream about first," Penelope said. "He'd die happy, you know. He's afraid of you, and that's one of the things he tells himself to bolster his courage. That if he died after kissing you, he would die happy."

No he wouldn't, Margareta thought angrily. He would die screaming, because sirens enjoyed the pain of their victims. She would –

"Now I'll go see that some breakfast is sent up, and leave you two alone," Penelope said, striding out of the library as Erik entered it. "And if she doesn't let you kiss her before I return, I'll see that the whole island knows she's an ill-mannered sea-cow!" she threw over her shoulder before vanishing from sight.

Margareta's face grew beet red.

Erik took pity on her embarrassment. "My apologies, my lady. Despite our history together, we have not been properly introduced. Allow me to correct this terrible oversight. I am Prince Erik, and I am honoured to meet you, Lady Margareta. Never have I met such a fair lady, who is also a graceful dancer and a learned scholar. I am quite entranced." He held out his hand.

A hand Margareta knew she should cover with her own. Custom demanded it. So did Penelope, who would know if she did not. She'd touched him before, as both a human and a siren, and he was still alive. If she could control herself for a few brief seconds, he would live to see tomorrow, too.

Margareta stretched out her arm, biting her lip as she saw her fingers shaking. If only she didn't have to touch him. She didn't want to hurt him. She wanted...

Erik captured her trembling fingers and brought them to his lips. Warm and soft, his lips made her fingers tingle as he kissed each one. Her mind screamed at her to pull away, but Margareta could not. Her own lips parted as she stared at him, eager to know what he would do next.

"Lady Penelope was right to berate me for being so unkempt. I was so caught up in my research, I forgot myself. Now, perhaps, I am in a fit state to greet you as I should have on the day we met. If I meet with your approval, then perhaps..." Erik swallowed, then lifted her hand to his now smooth cheek. "If my lady would permit, I would like to offer you a kiss of peace."

As her father's vassals offered to him, Margareta knew, and the captains who sought his favour. It was a religious thing, a chaste thing, a ceremony of power. It shouldn't send her heart racing like hers did now.

And yet...to refuse would be churlish. He honoured her, for such gestures were for leaders like her father. Not his youngest daughter.

Shakily, Margareta gave a nod.

Erik lifted his hands to touch her shoulders.

A fountain of butterflies erupted in her belly. This was dangerous, she shouldn't...

Margareta brought her other hand to his cheek so that she could cup his face. She took a deep, steadying breath, then stretched up to lay her lips against his.

For one brief moment, their kiss was a chaste thing. Then Margareta forgot everything but the feel of Erik against her, the taste of his mouth and the hardness of him between her thighs as he pulled her closer, closer, still kissing her as if she was the very air he needed to breathe. She needed more than air from him, more than the deep, gasping breaths she drew in as she tugged at his tunic, sliding her hands inside to feel soft skin over firm muscles, stroking every bit of him she could reach until she wrapped her fingers around the hardest part between them and –

Her eyes on fire with desire, Margareta met Erik's gaze. God, he wanted her as much as she wanted him. She wanted, oh how much she wanted...

"Oh God, Margareta, I love you," he groaned.

Love? What she would do to him wasn't love. Hers wasn't a kiss of peace. It was a kiss of death.

Margareta tore herself away from him and ran.

Twenty-Two

Erik buried his head in his hands. He shouldn't have said it. Shouldn't have admitted that he'd loved her for years, since they first met in the boat, because no girl could ever compare to her. And turning a kiss of peace into one of raging lust with a woman who was already frightened of him...he deserved to be scourged for such blasphemy. No wonder the girl had run.

But the feel of her hands on him, stroking him in exactly the right way, as if she was as overcome by her own feelings as he was by his...

No. He'd imagined it, surely. No woman in creation would be so bold. A woman who could control the ocean could certainly control herself.

Whereas he was...an uncontrolled mess.

Cursing himself, Erik set off to find some cold water to douse his desire.

Twenty-Three

Margareta slammed the door behind her, then put her back to it, breathing hard. She wasn't sure if it was because she'd sprinted from the library to Penelope's chambers or whether it was the strange siren heat that still coursed through her that made her heart beat so fast within her chest that she could scarcely catch her breath.

"That good, was he?" Penelope asked calmly, wetting the end of her thread before inserting it through the eye of her needle. "I would have thought you'd have taken your time, but it's hard to savour your first."

Margareta tried to calm the jumble of images in her head so that Penelope would understand, for no one could be so calm in the face of what she had just experienced.

"I remember the day I first kissed Godfrey," Penelope said dreamily, as if she wasn't paying attention to Margareta at all. "We'd met at some of my father's feasts, but I'd never been able to exchange more than a few words with him. He'd told all sorts of stories about war and what he'd seen, stories I could listen to for hours, but my father never allowed me near enough to tell him so. But our eyes met across the hall enough times for him to start seeking me out, or find excuses to visit my father at home. One day, he brought an urgent message for my father when he was out, and only I was home. As was proper, I offered him refreshments, and suggested he wait for my father. He paid me some pretty compliment about how he'd wait forever for me, or some such thing, and he stumbled over the words as he never had in his stories. That's when he first kissed me. Well, I pushed him against the wall and kissed him, actually. Didn't take more than a moment before he was kissing me back just as eagerly. We kissed for quite a while, long enough for him to get good and excited so I could assess the goods, so to speak, which I admit were quite impressive, before my father's arrival interrupted us. The bustle at the door was enough for us to straighten our clothing and for me to whisper an invitation to meet me in the garden later that night, and the rest, well..." Penelope laughed. "By morning, I wanted no other man for my husband. Though from the way that man looks at you, he might be cut from the same cloth. My advice is to make sure he's as good

with his hands as he is with his mouth before you agree to more. A good lover should give more pleasure than he receives."

Margareta's mouth hung open. Penelope had to be jesting, surely. No woman...

"No woman wants a bad lover," Penelope finished for her. "I'd rather join the nunnery permanently than share a bed with a man who doesn't absolutely adore me, or at least love me."

A fleeting memory of her mother's people, and what they did to men who didn't please them, fluttered through Margareta's mind. She didn't want to see sharks devour Erik. She liked him. At least a little. He spoke to her face instead of her chest, and seemed to care what she thought. No one else except Penelope did that – not even her father. All he cared about was getting his sons back, her bawdy brothers who would go back to their violent ways the moment they regained human form, she was certain of it. At least she could save the people of Beacon Isle from them, if the island belonged to her. Or her husband, which was almost the same thing.

"Your brothers don't deserve the sacrifice you're making for them," Penelope said sadly. "But the prince you left in the library? Why don't you give him a chance to show you what kind of husband he'd make?"

Margareta regarded Penelope for a long moment. She might not want to admit it, but her friend was right. Her brothers didn't deserve what she was doing for them, but that didn't matter. She had given her word, and the people of Beacon Isle would suffer if she broke it.

But if she hadn't given her word...then she could speak to Erik, and tell him why he couldn't possibly be in love with a sea monster, for that's what she was to him. A creature in a book that sank ships and killed the prince she now knew was his brother. Who could kill him just as easily if she lost control and gave in to her siren nature.

One thing was certain: she didn't want Erik to suffer his brother's fate. She didn't want to watch a man she knew and perhaps even liked be ripped apart by sharks.

Never mind that she'd wanted to rip his clothes off earlier. It was a small miracle she hadn't ripped off his head, or any other part of him.

Margareta turned on her heel and left the room. She knew what she had to do.

There was only one thing that would stop her from turning into the most lascivious siren ever to step out of the sea: immersing herself in the ocean

for a swim. Surely that would cool her desire.

She hurried down the stone steps to the now deserted great hall, making her way out the gate with her head held high to forestall any questions. None of the guards would dare stop her – they knew who she was.

A flock of ravens flapped over the high walls of her father's house as she left its shelter, but Margareta paid them no heed. The only ravens she cared about were her brothers, and as long as she maintained her silence, she was doing all she could for them.

Her private cove was empty, as it should be. Margareta lost no time in removing her clothing – all of it, this time.

The waves kissed her skin as she trudged through the sand, until the water reached her waist. Then she lost all pretence of humanity and shifted into her true form, extending her fins past what had been her toes as cool skin enveloped her legs, turning them into a powerful tail as blue as the deep ocean waters where she was headed.

Twenty-Four

Erik splashed himself with cold water until the ewer was empty, before he dressed and headed to the highest part of the house, the passage that looked out over White Harbour to the sea. The waves were as turbulent as his own thoughts today. Though he hated to admit it, he had the answer his father sought: Beacon Isle paid tribute to no one, for it had no lord or monarch aside from its Master, who was a rich man indeed. The contents of his father's treasury were nothing to the port duties Master Nicholas collected in a single year.

Beacon Isle would be a rich prize to anyone who could conquer it, but the very nature of the island made it near impregnable. Master Nicholas had a neat navy of merchant ships that could turn to war as easily as they did to trade. Erik's father would never win the island by force.

And so he lingered here, pursuing his real quest – twin quests, truly. His pursuit of the mythical creatures who had saved him, and the girl who commanded them. A girl who drove him to insanity, so that he kissed her and professed his love in the most awkward way.

No wonder she'd left, undoubtedly disgusted that he would do such a thing.

He must have imagined her hands on him.

Even just the thought of it heated his blood to boiling again. Erik cursed and headed back to his chamber for more water. No, he'd go to the sea for a swim. Immersing his whole body in cold water would be a much better idea.

He reached the stairs, then stopped when he heard voices. Male voices this time.

"Did you see her again last night?"

"I see her most every night. She swims into the shallows in that cove just past the breakwater, lays herself down on the sand, and sleeps."

"Why haven't you taken her for your own if she's so pretty, then?"

"Oh, she's pretty enough, but she's a mermaid, man. What use is a woman who has a tail where her legs should be? Waste of a pair of tits if she has no legs to dive between."

"I heard of a brave man who tamed a mermaid once. They say she was the sweetest lay who ever lived, and she was his, because he tamed her. See, the trick is to stop her going back to the ocean – she's powerless on land. What he did was cut off her tail, I heard. Not like you would with a fish. No, she's got legs beneath those fins, and if you want to get between them, you have to cut her legs free. Do that, and she'll be your slave for life."

"A man took a sword to a mermaid and lived to tell the tale?"

"On my honour, though I heard it was just a knife. And the man was no ordinary man, but the Master of Beacon Isle himself."

"The Master? Master Nicholas?"

"Maybe. Might explain that daughter of his. Proud and beautiful as the day is long, not like normal girls. Wouldn't surprise me if she was half mermaid."

The other man laughed. "But which half? Now we know why the Master hasn't married her off yet."

"Maybe. Hey, when does she come ashore? Maybe I should try my luck, if mermaids are such sweet wives."

"Just after sunset."

At sunset he could see a mermaid? Without hesitation, Erik took the stairs three at a time, but he saw no sign of the men who had spoken. Only a pair of ravens perched on the window ledge, which flew off as he approached. Never mind, he told himself. If he could see a real mermaid with his own eyes, he could show the creature to Margareta. Then she might trust him with her secrets, or at least stop thinking he was a fool.

He felt for his knife, closing his fingers reassuringly around the hilt. A mermaid was a wild creature at best, and all the stories agreed on one thing: she would kill him without hesitation if she felt threatened. The knife was for his protection.

Twenty-Five

Erik reached the breakwater, and only when he stood on it could he see the small cove he'd heard the men speak about. Small, private, and empty. On a hot summer's day, he'd love to take a dip in the water himself. Now, though, he had no intention of entering the sea. Not if a mermaid lurked close by.

Feeling like a coward, he climbed a tree, hoping its branches would hide him from sight. None of his research suggested that mermaids could climb trees, but Erik didn't let himself feel too secure on his perch. Research and myths were one thing, but facing a mermaid in the flesh was something different entirely.

For what felt like forever, Erik clung to his branch, watching and waiting. He'd spot a shadow in the waves, only to realise it was a piece of seaweed or flotsam. His eyes began to grow heavy as he squinted into the sun, straining for even a glimpse of the mythical mermaid.

When she did appear, he almost missed it. A wave washed further up the beach than its fellows and when it retreated, it left behind what Erik at first thought was the decoration from the bow of a ship. A stylised fish-woman, stretching her arms and her breasts before her while her tail fanned out behind.

And then....she moved, flicking a piece of seaweed off her tail, before she combed her fingers through her dark hair.

Erik almost fell out of his tree. A mermaid. A real mermaid, not fifty feet from him!

With care to make as little sound as possible, he climbed down, creeping through the shrubbery to get a better look at the mythical creature he'd sought for so long.

Slowly, slowly, he raised his head above a bush. He saw her dark hair, then the pale skin of her back, and his breath caught in his throat. Legs. She stood on two legs, just like him, though hers were bare.

In one moment, she'd shredded half the tales he'd read about her kind. Erik grinned. He'd write his own book, perhaps, and give Master Nicholas' library a copy. Or give it to Lady Margareta as a gift. Now that was an idea.

He should have asked Margareta to come with him to see the mermaid. Tomorrow he'd bring her to the cove and watch her reaction.

He must have made some sound, because the mermaid suddenly stiffened. She scanned the cove, then turned around and directed her piercing gaze at the bushes where Erik hid. His instincts screamed at him to duck, to get out of sight, but he was mesmerised by the woman before him. And she was a woman. Mermaid or not, the goddess who stood on the sand had two shapely legs, a flat belly and a pair of breasts he ached to touch.

The siren had him under her spell, his fuzzy mind told him, but Erik waved the thought away. Who cared? She was beautiful and alluring and everything a man could want. Everything he could ever want.

Erik rose to his feet and stepped out of hiding. He narrowed the distance between them and held out his arms. When she pressed her cold body against his, he closed his arms around her, and knew nothing but the bliss of holding his heart's desire.

Twenty-Six

Margareta let the wave carry her up the beach, then stretched out on the sand as the water retreated. Perhaps she'd swum a little too far today, after so long on land. She should swim more regularly, instead of spending so much time with Penelope and Melitta, or in the library. That would keep her away from Erik, too, which could only be a good thing for both of them.

Slowly, she let her body transform from tail to legs once more. Life was so much simpler under the sea. But without her tail, she most certainly felt the chill in the evening air, so she couldn't stay here for long. She'd need to dress and head back up to her father's house before dark, or her father's guards would shut the gate. They'd open it for her if she commanded it with an imperious wave in the absence of words, but her father would hear of it, and no good would come of that. At the least, she'd receive a long lecture about how she shouldn't give in to her siren and swim. More like he didn't want her messing with the ships approaching the harbour before they'd paid their duties. He never mentioned ships that had recently left the harbour, though. Maybe he didn't care about those.

Margareta flicked her hair, running her fingers through it to free it from some of the tangles.

A gasp from behind her made her whirl on the spot, looking for the hidden watcher. Had he seen her tail? Had he seen her transform? If anyone told her father...

No one would tell her father, for none would live to tell tales, Margareta resolved. She sent out a silent call, whispering through the trees where she was certain someone hid. No man was immune to a siren's call.

A man stepped out of the shadows, stumbling across the sand to obey her call. One man, no more.

He held out his arms, eyes begging for an embrace. For death's embrace.

Margareta stepped into the circle of Erik's arms and looked into his eyes. Though she might look like a human, all her siren senses were awakened. If you love me, show me, she silently commanded him.

He nodded, and brought his lips to hers for a kiss. Her lips warmed at his touch, wanting more. If she could have spoken, she would have said so. As

it was, she let her eyes speak for her.

Erik's hand stroked her leg, trailing his fingers higher until he reached the junction of her thighs. Margareta gasped as his fingers slid inside, stroking her even more intimately than before.

"I love you," he whispered, tightening his grip around her with one arm as her knees weakened from the caresses from his other hand. His gaze held hers as he did something with his fingers that sent waves of pleasure washing over her.

Margareta opened her mouth in a silent scream of joy, while Erik's fingers moved within her again.

When the next tide of pleasure swept through her, Margareta forgot caution and secrecy and all the things that might make her stop. She tore at Erik's clothes, pushing him to the sand. She would have him, and silly human social conventions meant nothing.

For the first time in her life, Margareta lost control as she surrendered to her siren.

Twenty-Seven

Margareta woke slowly, revelling in the unaccustomed warmth of her bed. She must have fallen asleep on the sand in her tail again. She'd best turn back to human and get some clothing on before some fisherman stumbled across her.

She blinked away the sleep from her eyes, stretching. Her legs touched warm flesh and cloth. Margareta tried to jerk away from the other body, but a heavy arm lay across her, holding her close.

By all the saints, who had she killed?

She squirmed out from under the man and flipped him over. She almost cried with relief when she saw his chest rise as he drew breath. She hadn't killed him. Hesitantly, she reached for the cloak that shrouded him and pulled the fabric away from his face.

Margareta staggered back, falling to the sand.

Erik. She'd surrendered to her siren nature and seduced Erik.

Now, more than ever, she wished she could speak to him. Damn her stupid brothers for getting cursed, and twice damn her father for persuading her to break their curse. It was almost as bad as being cursed herself, and what had she done to deserve it?

She stared down at Erik. If what her father told her was true, she might have permanently damaged Erik. She wouldn't know until he woke whether he'd been driven mad by whatever she'd done to him.

Seven hells...what had she done to him? She'd never allowed a man close enough to her for something like this to happen before. A small part of her whispered that now she'd tried intimacy with a man, she would want plenty more, but Margareta hushed it. If her pleasure came at the cost of Erik's sanity, it was too high a price to pay. Ever.

Margareta shook Erik, but he didn't wake. Her heart sank. If he'd lost his senses, he might never wake. Killing him would be a mercy, and it would be her responsibility to end the suffering she had inflicted on him.

She was a true siren. She'd destroyed a man, and nothing could fix this.

"Whore!" screamed a voice, as something sharp hit her shoulder.

Margareta whirled, and something hit her back.

"Could have saved us, but a whore like you couldn't stay a maiden for long enough!" shrieked another voice.

"Whore!" hissed a third as dark projectiles hit her on both sides.

This time, Margareta saw one of them. It wasn't a projectile at all, but a dark bird that darted down to peck at Erik. Margareta flapped a hand at the bird to shoo it away from her unconscious lover, but she was too late – its beak was already red with blood.

For the second time in two days, Margareta lost control of her human nature. But this time, the siren reigned supreme.

The ocean surged up the beach at her command, circling her and Erik with an army of waves while the sand beneath him remained untouched.

Suddenly the air was filled with dark feathers as half a dozen ravens flew in to attack Margareta from all sides. She directed the water to fight them, but it wasn't enough – some of them reached her, clawing and pecking at her face before she managed to stun one with her fist. She only had a moment's reprieve, though, before the stunned bird was replaced with two more, angrier and more intent on drinking her blood than their disoriented brother.

All the while, their caws sounded more like cries of "Whore!" than the calls of ordinary birds.

One of them fastened onto a chunk of her hair, beating its wings furiously as it tried to rip the hair from her head. If she could have made a sound, Margareta would have screamed, it hurt so much when the lock of hair parted from her scalp. She felt something warm against her back and spun around, terrified that it was a cascade of her own blood. Instead, she found Erik, risen to his feet with murder in his eyes.

"I won't let them hurt you," he vowed, brandishing a knife. A bird darted toward Margareta, then changed direction, aiming for Erik's eyes. His arm whipped out, swifter than a bird in flight. Light flashed on his blade as he separated the bird from its head, and both fell at Margareta's feet. "I count ten more. Keep doing whatever you're doing, and leave killing them to me."

Margareta nodded, not sure what to think. The only clear thought in her head was that Erik had most certainly not lost his wits, and whatever she and Erik had done last night, he hadn't paid the price for it.

She punched another bird as it dived for her, sending it into the crest of a wave, which quickly sucked it under. Concentrating on the water, she built up a particularly big wave and used it to engulf three more birds. Panting,

she lifted her arm to clout another, only to see Erik cut it down before it could reach her.

"That's all of them, my lady," Erik said, sounding just as breathless as she.

Margareta turned to face him. Erik was as naked as she was, except for the cloak he'd wrapped around them both while they lay on the beach.

Memories trickled back of their night together, two bodies so entwined even she hadn't known which limbs belonged to who. Nor had she cared. He might be her first, but no other man could compare. And not only had she not killed him, but she'd chosen to protect him even in the throes of unbridled passion. Somehow, Erik had succumbed to her siren call and lived. That made him a very special man indeed. Perhaps Penelope was right about him.

Staring into Erik's eyes, she felt lost.

Margareta dismissed the ocean, so that she stood alone with Erik on the damp sand.

He chuckled. "My lady, you should probably cover yourself. Looking like that, you could charm the birds from the sky as well as the fish from the sea." As he wrapped his cloak around her, he winked.

It took Margareta a moment to realise what he'd seen. Not just her naked body, but her power over the ocean. Her blood ran cold, colder even than when she swam the depths as a mermaid. Had he seen...?

"I heard rumours of a mermaid, and I came to spy the truth of it for myself before bringing you to the cove so that you might see the creature. Only to find...you know far more of such things than I ever will." Erik pulled her close, laying his cheek beside hers so that his lips brushed her ear. "Marry me, my lady of the seas. I will love you and keep your secrets as long as I live, and all I ask in return is your love, if you are willing."

Margareta wanted to shout her answer at the top of her lungs, but her silence stole her voice, even as her lips formed a YES.

"Whore!" screeched a voice. "Faithless woman! How dare you take this man into your bed while we suffer. The man who killed your own brothers. Neither of you deserve to live!"

To Margareta's stunned horror, a raven with an injured wing hopped across the sand to attack her feet, screaming obscenities and accusations.

A firm hand grasped the bird by the neck and held it up in the air. "You're a fool, Corbin. I gave you and your brothers a chance to live, to atone for your crimes. I even told you how to break the curse. You couldn't get girls

to fall in love with you, but your sister, whose loyalty to her family made her vow to save you, still might have freed you. If you'd waited a few more hours, she would have broken the spell with seven years of silence, virgin or no. But now...you have forfeited your right to even a sister's love." The woman who'd spoken wrung the neck of the bird and tossed it on the sand beside the other piles of damp feathers that Margareta now realised were the corpses of the rest of the ravens.

Her brothers.

The woman bit down hard on her lip, raising her hands high. The birds moved, floating until their bodies formed a line on the sand. Only then did they begin to lose their feathers, growing until they became not birds but young men. Young men she remembered, though they were older now. Raban had been a boy of her own age when she last saw him, the youngest of her brothers, and now he was a man grown. A man decapitated, too, for his head lay a foot from his body.

Margareta let out a sob, and another. The sound of her voice seemed to echo in the cove, for it had been so long since she had heard it. "I didn't want them to die!" she cried, falling to her knees.

The same strong hand that had wrung Corbin's neck landed on her shoulder. "Then you are a better person than any of your brothers. They would have killed you, and your boy here." The woman nodded at Erik. "He'll make a better Master of the island than any of your kin."

"But Father," Margareta began, horrified anew at the thought of what her father would say when he saw his precious sons laid low like this. They had died, while she yet lived. "Father is Master here. He will never forgive me for this, and Erik..."

"I summoned him to the cove when I arrived. He is already on his way," the woman said.

Sure enough, Father limped onto the sand, leaning heavily on his stick. He looked so frail now, as though the seven years which had passed were seventy instead. "What do you want, witch?" he demanded. "First you take my sons from me, sending them far away, and now you think to take my daughter, too?"

"I am Mistress Kun, no mere witch, and you would do well to address me so, Nicholas," the woman said. "Your sons sealed their own fate seven years ago, and today, they demonstrated that they have no right to live among decent people. They died at the hands of a woman. I call it justice."

"My sons?" Father faltered.

Mistress Kun pointed at the bodies, hidden from Father's sight by a sandbank.

It seemed to take him forever to reach the top, and when he did, his expression changed from bewilderment to something Margareta didn't think looked entirely human. His lips peeled away from his teeth and his eyes grew wild.

"What have you done to my sons?" he howled. His gaze fixed on Margareta. "It was you! A whore like your mother, opening your legs to every pretty man you can find. I might not have managed to kill your slut of a mother, but I will deal with you!" He advanced on Margareta, who cried out in fear, unable to move. He managed to take three steps before he keeled over face first on the sand.

Margareta wanted to dash forward to help him to his feet, but she remained rooted to the spot. Had her father really threatened to kill her? Or tried to kill her mother?

Mistress Kun knelt down to examine Father. "Dead," she grunted as she rose from her crouch. "Good riddance, too. You two will make a better job of ruling this place."

Two? Margareta stared at Erik, who looked as bewildered as she felt.

"My father sent me here to find a way to bring Beacon Isle into his kingdom. I was to discover which king the Master owed fealty to, and persuade him to become a part of my father's kingdom instead. Master Nicholas would not agree, but perhaps his heir..." Erik cleared his throat. "Lady Margareta, when your father's heir becomes Master of this island, perhaps you would be willing to put in a good word for me, and arrange a meeting?"

Heir? With her brothers dead and their curse broken, her father's heir would be...her.

"Marry me," she said.

Erik laughed. "I intend to, if you'll let me."

Margareta shook her head. "No, marry me. Beacon Isle belongs to me, and to my husband. Marry me and you may have the island." She gazed at Erik. "I ask only one thing."

"Name it," Erik urged.

Margareta wet her lips. "That you love me every night of your life as you did last night."

"I will," Erik vowed.

Mistress Kun cackled. "Sounds like happily ever after to me." She waved at the bodies lined up along the beach. "I will see that everyone knows the boys died far from home and when your father found out, he died of grief. You will inherit, no matter what his wishes were. You are the last of his line now." She gave a little bow to Margareta.

Enchantresses did nothing without a price. "I thank you, Mistress Kun," she said steadily. "How may I repay you for all that you have done for me?"

"For us," Erik corrected.

Kun grinned. "He's right, and I'll ask a favour of you both. Take Melitta and her mother with you when you leave the island. And when you are dowager queen, return to the isle and rule until your grandson comes of age to inherit the position of Master."

"It will be done," Erik vowed, and Margareta nodded, forgetting that she now had the use of her voice.

"A blessing on you both," Kun said gravely, waving her hand in their direction. "May you have your happily ever after as long as you both shall live." And with that, she disappeared.

Erik turned to Margareta. "Is this truly what you want? Will you be happy?"

For the first time in seven years, Margareta laughed aloud. "You already owe me your life, squire. I know you'll make me happy. I only hope I can return the favour."

"You already do," Erik said fervently. "And you always will."

If you'd like to read about Rosamond, whose story starts at Margareta and Erik's coronation, it's in *Awaken: Sleeping Beauty Retold*, which you can get HERE (http://www.demelzacarlton.com/fairytale/#Awaken).
Or if you'd like to read Melitta's tale, when she's all grown up, it's in *Embellish: Brave Little Tailor Retold* HERE (http://www.demelzacarlton.com/fairytale/#Embellish).
If you're looking for Penelope and Godfrey's story, it's in *Float: Enchanted Horse Retold* HERE (http://www.demelzacarlton.com/fairytale/#Float).
Or if you'd like to read the tale of Margareta's raven brothers attempting to break the curse on their own...it's *Revel: Twelve Dancing Princesses Retold*, which you can get HERE (http://www.demelzacarlton.com/fairytale/#Revel).
If you're looking for more of Demelza's medieval fairytales, you can find the rest of the series HERE (http://www.demelzacarlton.com/fairytale/).

Ocean's Secret

Demelza Carlton

One

A screech and a thump were my only whisper of warning.

I sighed. Another suicide.

I rounded the corner. The humped body of the big buck kangaroo sprawled like a sleeping seal by the side of the road. No other animal has a death-wish quite like a kamikaze kangaroo. The bitumen glittered in my headlights, as if frosted over in preparation for the dawn. The crunch beneath my tyres belied the thought of ice. I knew the sound of crushed glass.

The tail-lights of the tiny Toyota bled their glow onto the gravel beneath. The tree toppled between those two red eyes had folded the roof into a pair of ominous knitted eyebrows.

I slowed to a stop in the gravel behind it, hoping my help wouldn't be necessary. I left my headlights on to illuminate the wrecked hatchback. "Hello?" I called.

The answering groan was deep and came from the car. I peered through the back window, but the inflated airbags inside made it hard to see. I approached the driver's door.

"Are you okay?" I asked, knowing the answer already as I surveyed the damage done by both the kangaroo and the tree the driver had blindly swerved into.

"No," whimpered a female voice. "I...I can't get out."

Her door had popped partly open, so it wasn't difficult to pull on the handle to widen the gap. The airbag sprouting from her steering wheel pinned her to the seat. Under the weight of the fallen tree, both the roof and the console tightened into a cage around the airbag, making her car a padded cell in which she started to panic. She struggled to twist out of her seat, but she couldn't.

I waited a moment, before asking, "Can you undo your seat belt, or is it stuck?"

She looked at me in wonder and began fumbling for the seat belt buckle. I clearly heard the click that released her, before her scream shattered the air.

When she ran out of breath, she panted for a moment before she spoke. "I'm sorry," she said hoarsely.

I gritted my teeth into a smile. "Nothing to be sorry about. Let's get you out of there."

I helped her out of the driver's seat and onto her shaky legs. Only as she straightened beside me did I see the swollen belly that the airbag had hidden. I had barely a second to recognise her pregnancy before another contraction seized her. My arms were strong enough to support her, but her scream was longer this time. I saw the blood and fluid staining the driver's seat and felt a frisson of fear.

No. Can't hesitate. I'll do whatever it takes to save her. I won't lose this patient.

When the sound had died away, I said quickly, "Let's get you to my car, where you can lie down."

I helped her hobble to my car in time for her to topple into the back seat as her next contraction hit. Her scream rang in my ears, but I pulled out my phone, ready to ring for help as soon as she was silent.

I looked down. No signal. I held her life in my hands and mine alone. No, not just hers. Her unborn child, too.

So be it.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered, "but I think I'm having my baby, too."

For the first time, I smiled properly. "Then you're in luck. I'm Belinda, one of Albany Regional Hospital's best midwives and I'm on my way to work. I guess I'm starting early today, with you as my first patient. What's your name?"

"Miranda Nelson," she groaned over the next contraction. A gout of blood soaked the seat beneath her.

"I'll buckle you up and then we'd best get going," I said brightly, hoping there were no police up yet to catch me speeding. If I didn't get her to hospital soon, Miranda might bleed to death.

Not on my shift she won't.

Two

"I'm sorry," Miranda sobbed, before another scream sounded her next contraction.

"No need," I replied cheerfully. I found myself singing under my breath. I lifted my voice a little so she might hear the soothing song, too. *After all, it can't hurt. She's in enough pain already.*

A wail heralded another contraction, Miranda's panicked panting punctuating the time between. I glanced at my watch. *Five minutes. With the contractions so close, the next one should hit just as we get there.*

I braked carefully as we reached the ambulance entrance, the sound drowned in Miranda's deep groan. I threw myself out of my door and pelted to hers.

"EMERGENCY. I NEED A WHEELCHAIR!" I bellowed as a stricken-looking ward clerk appeared at the door.

"Yes, Belinda," Helen replied smartly, vanishing back inside. She returned in a moment with the small hospital's only wheelchair, angling it perfectly to catch Miranda as I levered her out of the car.

Helen pursed her lips at the sight of blood in the back seat of my car, but she said nothing. I passed her my keys as I took hold of the wheelchair. "Can you take care of my car, Helen?" I asked brightly, already rolling Miranda inside.

With the help of a sleepy orderly named Rob, I quickly ensconced Miranda in a birthing suite, her wail rising as another contraction hit her.

"Where's Jill?" I asked Rob, before he left the room.

"In with Mrs Barker. She went into labour and won't let Jill leave. Jill and the anaesthetist are trying to persuade her to have an epidural, but she swears she won't."

Two difficult births in one night – Mrs Barker and now Miranda. This was going to be harder than I'd thought. I sucked in a breath, wondering who else would be able to help me. "Where's Dr Henderson?"

Rob shrugged. "He's not on duty – he's on the afternoon shift. We got a new intern for the morning shift – he's shaking in his office. I swear he goes whiter every time Mrs Barker bellows. Not like you – everyone knows you're the ice queen. Cool, calm and collected – no matter what."

The last thing I needed was a terrified intern for this birth. *Alone, then*. "Can you send the anaesthetist to me, after he's done with Mrs Barker? Miranda Nelson was in a car accident, and it looks like she's gone into premature labour."

Miranda let out another hoarse scream.

"And get someone to call her husband. He's up in Perth this week, I believe – tell him we'll have her flown up to King Edward Memorial Hospital as soon as we can. Call the Flying Doctors for transport, too." I looked at Miranda, straining through another contraction.

Rob hurried out, leaving us alone.

"Just you and me, Miranda," I said softly.

"No," Miranda gasped out. "She's coming. She's coming...urngh!"

Not wanting to believe her, I examined her as quickly as I could. She was almost fully dilated. There would be two patients for transport, not one.

And it's up to me to make sure they survive.

"So she is," I replied, keeping my voice calm. "It's time to push, Miranda. I hope you have a name picked out."

Three

I watched with worried eyes as the paramedic strapped Miranda into a stretcher and loaded her into the small aircraft, followed by her newborn child.

"Thank you," Miranda said hoarsely, a smile stretching her face as her eyes shimmered with tears. "I don't know what would have happened without all your help."

My smile was more strained than hers. She didn't know what would have happened, but I did. The child would be in the hospital morgue and Miranda might have followed soon after. "My pleasure. The hospital staff in Perth will take care of you both. Your husband will be there when the plane lands."

The Royal Flying Doctor Service plane's doors slammed shut and the pilot crunched across the gravel on his way to the cockpit.

I heard a shout from across the field.

"Wait!"

The emergency gate ground open, motor whirring and metal grating on metal.

Both the pilot and I turned to see a lanky man running through the grinding gate and across the gravel beside the tarmac. His long strides cleared the distance faster than I could have. He waved a paper file that looked like medical records.

The man was breathless when he reached us, but he still managed to make his words intelligible. "The patient's file. Has to go with her on the plane." He held out the white cardboard folder with a rainbow of numbered stickers up the side.

The pilot took the folder with a nod and climbed into the plane. I backed away to a safe distance and the breathless man did the same. "Glad I got here in time," he gasped. He was almost doubled over, his hands near his knees, as he tried to catch his breath. He appeared to be speaking to the gravel beneath his large feet.

I looked around, but I saw no one else within earshot, so the man must have been speaking to me.

"What did you do to make the hospital staff send you racing out here with medical records? Did you steal one of the doctors' parking spots?" I asked,

hoping to head off any further conversation.

Privately, I thought it more likely that he was a member of the cleaning staff that I hadn't met yet, who'd been sent here by the cowering intern, too shaken to venture out of his office to drive.

Instead of being offended, the man laughed. He stood up and I realised for the first time that the length of his limbs matched his height – he was taller than me. "I may be the most junior doctor at the hospital, but I still get my own parking spot. I'm Aidan Lannon, the intern. I wrote up the patient's notes so slowly that I didn't realise she'd left without them, so it was my responsibility to take them to the airport."

So this is the new intern – and he's not the useless, quivering wreck Rob said he was. He's a man who takes his responsibilities seriously and doesn't send a flunky to make up for his mistakes. I found I almost liked him. Begrudgingly, I began, "I'm Belinda," but that's as far as I got.

"I know who you are. You're the midwife who saved that woman's life, and her baby. If it weren't for you, they both would've died." His eyes shone with something like admiration.

I sighed. "I'm the student midwife, who happened to drive past where she'd crashed her car into a kangaroo and took her to hospital with me at the start of my shift. When she went into premature labour, she became my patient, as Jill, the qualified midwife, was dealing with a difficult delivery for a woman who refused anaesthesia. I told Jill I'd let her know if I ran into trouble, but it wasn't necessary, and her patient needed her more."

I hit the gate release and we waited for it to clank open before trudging from the restricted airside gravel to the bitumen between the hire cars and the staff car park. Together, we stood and watched the tiny plane taxi down the runway. It took off, shrinking into the sky until it rose above the cloud ceiling and out of sight. Silently, I wished the woman luck, hoping that her daughter would survive long enough to leave hospital and go home with her mother. My hopes for happiness flew with her.

Happiness I will never know. My daughter no longer lives.

I sagged, suddenly realising how exhausted I was.

Yet the intern turned to me, his eyes full of unmistakeable awe. "If that was your first solo delivery, you're in the wrong profession. You should have studied medicine instead of nursing. I couldn't have done it."

I was too tired to explain to him that Miranda's child was by no means the first baby I'd delivered, nor the most difficult. Instead, I looked for my car

in the parking lot.

"How did you get here?" Aidan persisted.

I wondered the same thing, as the only car I could see was not mine. "In the ambulance, with my patient," I replied slowly. The ambulance had left without me. I hoped that didn't mean there would be another emergency waiting at the hospital. If and when I managed to make my way back there. It would be a long walk – more than three hours. There wasn't a taxi in sight and my bag, my phone and my wallet were back in my locker at the hospital. I heaved a deep sigh and summoned the strength to start the long journey back.

Aidan pressed a button on his key. The lone car in the parking lot flashed its orange lights. "Let me give you a lift back to the hospital."

I considered refusing. I also considered how tired I was. By the time I reached the hospital on foot, my shift would be well and truly over and the sun would have set. I hadn't brought a torch and there weren't any streetlights for most of the way. It'd be pitch dark and I'd be a good target for the Nannup Tiger, if it existed.

"Okay." I tried to keep my face expressionless. It wasn't difficult, as even the effort of forming any expression was exhausting.

Aidan drove a Mini, a very small car that appeared incongruous to his size. He opened the passenger door and started pitching things from the passenger seat into the back, before he gestured for me to sit down. He seemed really nervous, apologising for the mess in his vehicle.

I sat in the passenger seat, carefully placing my feet between a pair of very large sneakers and some muddy gumboots. Noticing something uncomfortable beneath me, I reached for it and pulled out a stethoscope, the head of the chestpiece decorated with a sticker of a three-lobed leaf.

In three strides he rounded the front of his car and folded himself into the space between the driver's seat and the steering wheel. He reminded me of an octopus squeezing itself into a small rock crevice, only more angular and awkward.

When he'd managed to wedge himself inside, I held up the stethoscope, lifting my eyebrows, too.

"Oh hell, sorry. That's my lucky stethoscope. Dad gave it to me before I left Ireland and I forgot to take it off before I left the hospital." He took it from me and stuffed it into the glove box.

He said little and I said less for the start of the drive, until we were forced to stop by a flock of sheep moving across the road from one paddock to another. The farmer shifting them waved to us and walked over to the driver's side window.

He and Aidan discussed sheep and I let my mind wander, not listening, until I caught the words, "...Nannup Tiger..."

I turned to listen to their conversation.

Aidan laughed. "You don't expect me to believe in the Nannup Tiger, do you? That's just something you made up for tourists!"

The farmer shook his head. "The Nannup Tiger's real, mate. It took two of my lambs last week and Pete next door said he's lost three. Pete's missus saw a slinking dark shape by one of the sheds near the house the night they lost two lambs. You watch out for it. I'm shifting my lambing ewes closer to the house, so the dog and I can keep a better eye on them."

He waved again as he closed the gate behind his sheep.

Aidan crunched his car back into gear and accelerated away. "So, do you believe in the Nannup Tiger?" he asked, without taking his eyes off the road.

I replied cautiously. "It's a native species that's believed to be extinct because no one's seen one for a long time, isn't it? With all the forests and big farms around here, anything could be hiding. It wouldn't surprise me if there are still some around, even if no one sees much of them. Aren't there plenty of undiscovered species in the world, even in Australia? What's one more?"

Aidan's laughter died. "Some stories say it's a thylacine, some sort of big native cat, but others say it's a black panther that escaped from a circus. No one seems to know what it is." He looked nervously into the trees on either side of the road.

I made myself smile. "Well, if you're scared of it, don't go out at night, then," I said lightly.

He shivered and continued driving, this time in silence.

Four

When we reached the hospital, my shift was over. I thanked Aidan for the lift and headed inside to collect my bag. I lifted the bag onto my shoulder, without pausing, and turned on my heel to head out the way I'd come. I heard the clink of keys inside and thanked Helen in my head, hoping I'd remember to thank her properly when I saw her next.

Aidan was talking to one of the receptionists at the front desk when I stepped into the entrance lobby. Tired and unwilling to engage in further conversation with the intern, I crossed the lobby as quickly as I could to the front door.

The automatic doors slid open to reveal darkness and rain. I didn't mind water falling from the sky, but I did mind the way my clothing stuck to me when I was drenched. Environmental water and clothing is a bad combination. It seemed far more practical to me to go naked in the rain.

I braced myself for the uncomfortable restriction of my wet pants clinging to my legs when a hand touched my arm. Aidan stood beside me, screwing his nose up at the rain.

"It's times like this that I realise why I left Ireland for Australia," he told me with a big smile.

"Why did you leave Ireland, then?" I asked.

"For the beautiful, sunny Australian climate!" He laughed and started to open an umbrella, again reminding me of an octopus. This time, the octopus appeared to be jetting through the water to evade something unpleasant, unable to find a rock cleft to hide in. I knew how it felt.

After two or three tries, Aidan managed to keep his umbrella open. He waved his hand toward the raindrop-free zone created under its expanse. "It's a golf umbrella, with room for two. I'll walk you to your car, if you like."

For the second time that day, I permitted the intern to do me a favour. He didn't say anything while we walked to the car. I opened the door and glanced at the back seat, but the strong smell of cleaning chemicals alerted me before I turned my head. The reddened seat had returned to plain grey, much like the skies above and my own thoughts. Helen had truly taken care of my car and I doubly owed her my thanks.

He waited without moving until I sat in the driver's seat. My fingers curled stiffly around the door handle to pull it shut.

"Come to dinner with me?" the intern asked, in a rush.

I raised my eyebrows, but didn't reply.

His face turned red, making his fiery red hair look pale for the first time. "I mean, if you want to, it would be really nice if you came with me to the pub to have dinner tonight. After a long day like this, the last thing I want to do is cook, and your day was harder than mine."

For a moment, I wondered if this strange man could read my mind. I'd intended to stop for some takeaway fish and chips on my way home. Perhaps it might be pleasant to eat in a restaurant for once, instead of in my small house by myself.

I stared at him a moment, before I heard the word spoken with my voice. "Okay."

His face faded from red to pink to white and he smiled, looking slightly stunned. "So, meet you at the Tanglehead?"

It took me a moment to remember this was the name of a brewery near the port. For the third time, I replied, "Okay."

Five

Two beers and a very filling meal later, Aidan admitted that he owed me.

"Why?" I asked diffidently, sipping my beer.

"Your patient today should have been mine. If you hadn't been there, I would have stuffed up and I don't know what would have happened. I'm terrified of babies." From his wide-eyed expression, I judged that this was not a joke but the truth.

For the first time, I smiled. "How can you be afraid of babies?"

He looked embarrassed. "I'm the youngest of eight kids back in Ireland. One of my aunties moved over here and married an Australian, so I came over to do my internship, when I finished my medical degree. I've never delivered a baby and this one would have been my first. Mum never let me hold any of my nieces and nephews, because she was afraid I'd drop the babies. I guess I got scared I'd drop them, too. They're so tiny!" He spread out his big hands, wide enough to cradle the premature baby I'd delivered this afternoon.

"Ah." I nodded, understanding. His fear was like that of most first-time fathers, or at least the few I'd seen. Most of the babies I'd delivered never knew their fathers. This was probably for the best. It was the ones who never knew their mothers that made me...

I hurriedly gulped down the last of my beer as he drained his second. Coming from such a fertile family, he'd surely never experienced the loss I'd suffered. He wouldn't understand.

We both stood up at the same time. Together, we walked to the cashier and paid for our meal.

Outside the pub, he thanked me for joining him for dinner.

I replied in kind and headed into the darkness toward my car before he could follow. My tears dripped silently to the blackness of the parking lot, unseen and unheard by any but me.

Six

The following morning, as I sipped my coffee alone in the hospital cafeteria, the intern slid into the seat across from me.

"Do you mind if I join you?" he asked with a grin, taking a slurp before clunking his own coffee cup down on the table.

I shook my head, not lifting my eyes or my lips from the cup. Last night had been a long and lonely one, darker than most, given the memories Miranda had inadvertently stirred. I needed my caffeine more than ever. In fact, I was considering a second cup, if time permitted.

The man seemed to be waiting for something, but he appeared too eager to practice patience for long. "Look, I haven't been here very long and I don't know anyone. I was wondering if you could help me out with some recommendations on how best to live here in Albany – where to eat and buy stuff, where the best nightlife is...hell, I'd be incredibly grateful. I'd buy you dinner, anywhere you like."

I summoned a smile. "I've only been here a few months myself. I hardly know where would be best to do most things and I rarely see much nightlife, unless you count kangaroos when I'm on early shifts. After yesterday, I'd prefer not to see too many more of those."

I suppressed a shudder but my smile evaporated.

He seemed to understand, yet still he persisted. "Even just someone to sit with for coffee and break times. You're the only person here who's spoken more than two words to me that weren't work-related since I arrived a week ago." His smile refused to fade. "Please?"

I shrugged. "Sit where you like. I don't mind." I drained my coffee and stood to make another. I decided I just had time for it.

He reached for my cup. "Let me get you another one. I need a second one, too."

I surrendered the empty mug. "White, one sugar."

His grin widened. "Same as mine." He strode away.

I wondered what he saw in my company to attract him. It didn't matter. Whatever it was, he'd probably imagined it and would soon realise this.

I did not share his fear of being alone. For me, it was simply a way of life.

Seven

The ward was both busy and short-staffed. Too many had succumbed to early colds with the onset of the winter weather. I barely managed to get breaks for the remainder of my week, so in my brief time in the cafeteria I saw nothing of the intern.

As always, busy periods are succeeded by lulls. I was granted a longer lunch break than usual when an influx of third-year nursing students invaded the hospital. The shortage of staff became a surplus that I was pleased to enjoy, however briefly.

Lunch came with another unexpected surprise – the first harvest of winter vegetables was in. The menu board proudly advertised this, along with the *Return of the Rainbow Lasagne*.

I surveyed the colourful, layered slab on my plate as I sat down at a table by the window, trying to work out what was in each layer. The red meat sauce I recognised, along with the pumpkin beneath it. The squash and zucchini layers I identified after a few moments, but the blue and purple ones left me mystified. I carved up a bite and forked it into my mouth, hoping the taste might help me.

I admitted defeat as I swallowed, resolving to let it remain a mystery. I opened my eyes to cut another piece, still puzzled.

"Blue cheese and eggplant," the intern's voice murmured as his lasagne-topped plate landed on the table across from mine.

I looked up in time to see him sit down.

"I asked the server at the counter," he admitted with a grin. "Is it good?"

Slowly, I nodded.

"Then I get a double bonus at lunch today. Good food and good company." He shovelled a large bite of lasagne into his mouth.

If he classed me as good company, I felt sorry for the man, but not enough to tell him so. I was certain he'd soon work out there were other staff who'd be far better company than I could ever be. Silence, sadness and all.

My fork clinked against the plate as I cut another slice with more force that necessary, shoving it into my mouth before I said something.

My mouth safely full, I dared to look up at his face again, meeting expectant eyes with surprise. Had he said something that I'd missed?

Evidently so.

His smile seemed to forgive my rudeness, as he said, "I just asked if you liked fishing, because I seem to have found a really great fishing spot and it'd be a shame not to share it. Down near my house, on the inlet, I caught a big, fat bream, fishing from the shore a few days ago. I thought maybe if you were free on the weekend, you might like to come fishing with me..." He trailed off.

I swallowed with difficulty, forcing myself not to choke. "No, thank you," I managed to say. "I don't fish."

"Ah, that's a pity," he replied. "I could show you, if you like. I have all the gear. All you'd have to bring is yourself. I'd even offer to scale and clean your catch..."

I shook my head strongly. "No. I'm busy studying this weekend."

I hurried to finish my meal, yet I wasn't fast enough to head off his reply. "Fair enough." He sounded sad. "If you ever change your mind, just say the word."

I shot up from my seat, my mouth full. I gave him a curt nod as I passed him, taking my plate to the dish racks in the kitchen.

Longing rose up in me. I wanted to go fishing more than I could say, the taste of fresh fish haunting my tongue, but I wouldn't until I headed home. I had to finish my term as a student midwife and complete my exams before I could fish in the warm waters of home for wahoo and tuna, Spanish mackerel and mahi-mahi. Big fish for which a bream was nothing but undersized bait.

As I left the cafeteria, I noticed the intern speaking to the server and both sharing a smile. I ardently hoped this meant he'd found a new focus for his friendship. Perhaps another girl might find the burden of his kindness easier to bear.

Eight

We're short in ED. The agency has no nurses left and we've just had to admit one as a patient, when her fever ran too high and she fainted." The harried-looking Helen bit her lip. "Please, if either of you can be spared from your ward for a few hours to fill in for the ED..." She looked desperately at me.

I exchanged a glance with Jill. We weren't busy, but if a patient presented, wanting a midwife, that could quickly change.

"Tell Dr Henderson he can call on us in an emergency if ED absolutely needs another staff member," Jill said finally.

Helen's face crumpled. "It's not Dr Henderson. He's home sick, too. The only doctor we have is that new intern..."

Jill's eyes widened. "Did you ask the other wards? Aren't there some nursing students in the general surgery ward?"

"We have nursing students, too. What we need is an experienced RN."

I owed Helen a favour for taking care of my car as I cared for Miranda. Perhaps this was an appropriate way to both thank and repay her. "I'll do it. I'll work the full shift in ED instead of here."

Jill opened her mouth to protest.

"If we get any deliveries, I'll be the first to know and I'll bring them back to the birthing suite," I promised.

Jill's mouth closed as she nodded once.

I marched back with Helen to the Emergency Department. I hadn't worked in one since my days as a student nurse, but even then I'd enjoyed the challenge of triage and the sheer variety of cases that came through. We got all sorts in ED.

A country ED was no different, though the lack of staffing made this one more chaotic than usual. I heard the screaming as I approached, quickening my step to a trot to reach my destination faster.

The screaming baby in the waiting room had a broken arm and he'd been waiting for too long, judging by his mother's panicked expression. The man with the bloodied broken nose was drunk and would pass out soon, negating the need for pain relief if he waited much longer.

The poor student nurse on the front desk had noticed neither of these as she was busy arguing with a woman whose young son was sneezing and

sniffling as she screamed hysterically that he had meningococcal and he'd die unless they admitted him, though he had no fever.

Through the curtains of a cubicle, I saw Aidan tending to another patient, but he'd taken to running his hands through his hair until it stood out in crazy, escaping tufts. His wide eyes were starting to show panic, too, though his voice remained calm.

All in all, the ED was ready to explode.

I took charge.

The student nurse arranged the tests for the toddler with the paranoid mother. "Better safe than sorry," I told her with a grim smile.

I sent another student to man the desk and check that the drunk was okay to wait until the more urgent patients were seen to, while I ushered the mother and her broken-armed baby into the children's cubicle. "He climbed out of his high chair and I couldn't stop him. I only turned my back for a second – but he was strapped in!" she wailed.

I said soothing things as I tried to examine the baby's arm. This one I needed a doctor for. *Aidan, time to demonstrate your skills,* I thought.

As if I'd said his name aloud, the intern appeared at my side. The mother thrust her baby at him and he backed up as if the child was a live bomb.

"You should hold him," I told the woman instantly, taking her attention from the intern. "He'll be more comfortable in his mother's arms and the doctor will have both hands free to conduct a thorough examination..."

Aidan's change of expression from fearful to professional took barely a moment, so that I was the only one to see the change. "How did it happen?" Aidan asked easily as he examined the child, keeping his voice calmer than his panicked eyes until the panic faded.

The mother's voice gradually calmed to match his as she repeated her story. He nodded as he kept his eyes on the baby, whose noisy crying had quietened to dry sobs.

I heard something clatter to the floor off to my right. "Oh shit," a female voice said clearly. The clattering continued.

"If you'll excuse me, Doctor," I said smoothly to the intern, who turned startled eyes on me. "Just sing out if you need any further assistance, Doctor, but it looks like you have this well under control without any need for me." I forced a professional smile for him and his patients.

After a few moments, the intern responded with a grave nod. "Of course, Nurse." He carefully avoided meeting my eyes.

I turned away, before he could change his mind, and crossed to the reception desk. The startled nursing student stood transfixed behind the desk, staring at a ragged hole in the ceiling and the furry creature scrabbling at the edge of the hole to regain its spot in the ceiling cavity. The bushy tail waved around aimlessly as the creature's claws dug into the ceiling foam, bringing down another shower of plaster, insulation and other debris that clattered noisily to the vinyl.

The girl turned to me. "What's that song you're humming?"

I hadn't realised I'd been making any noise, but I stopped the moment she mentioned it.

"Go get Tony, the maintenance man. Tell him another possum's punched a new hole in the ceiling in the ED," I instructed. I paused. "Do you know where Tony's workshop is?"

She nodded vigorously, her ponytail bobbing, and trotted off down the corridor. I stepped up to her place at the desk. The possum managed to find a clawhold to lift itself into the ceiling without widening the hole further. I caught a glimpse of a tiny hand in her pouch as the mother possum retreated into the roof space. We were spared a possum patient today.

The drunk had slumped to sleep across the waiting room bench, his snores telling me that his broken nose wasn't impeding his breathing any.

Behind me, the other nursing student marched off to Pathology with the samples from the sniffling toddler.

For a moment, I breathed a sigh of relief. From chaos to calm, the Emergency Department was now under my control.

Nine

The student who'd gone to Pathology returned with a smile for her patient and a promise to call his mother when the results came back.

As if on cue, the intern chose the same moment to release his patients, too, as the baby with the bandaged arm smiled a teary smile at his mother. Aidan stood beside me at the desk, watching them leave the ED.

When they were safely out of earshot he turned to me. "What in hell did that?" He nodded at the gaping hole in the ceiling.

"A surprised possum," I responded. I frowned. "I sent one of the students for Maintenance, but neither of them's back yet. I'll see if I can find them." I picked up the phone.

Tessa, the secretary in Engineering, answered after one ring. I asked after either the student or Tony and was told Tony was fixing a tap in a patient's room. The nursing student had ventured into Engineering and spoken to Tessa. Tessa had given her the room number, which she repeated for me as I carefully wrote it on a notepad.

Tessa promised to page Tony for me a second time, but I decided to go looking for the missing student and maintenance man.

"I'll be right back," I told the intern and remaining nursing student, who were both staring at the snoring drunk in the waiting room, their only remaining patient. Both nodded, but I wasn't sure if they'd heard.

I shrugged and strode off. I'd barely be gone five minutes, which was hardly enough time for chaos to reinvade my ED.

Clutching the paper in my hand, I kept looking at the room number. It was one of the isolation rooms, for contagious patients or those who needed to be kept apart from other patients for whatever reason.

As I approached the door, I heard a quiet whimpering on the edge of hearing, as if someone inside the room was in pain. The absence of signs or even a name on the door told me there was no patient in there, so my first thought was that the noise came from an injured staff member.

I pushed the door open, but most of the room was obscured by the curtain around the bed. The sound was louder now and definitely coming from behind the curtain. Worried, I edged around it, holding my breath as I followed the sound of the pitiful moans.

I saw the student's bored face first, her chin resting on the bed. The moaning came from her mouth, but she didn't look like she was experiencing the slightest discomfort, let alone pain. Behind her, Tony the elderly maintenance man had his eyes closed and a blissful expression on his face.

I looked more closely, not making a sound. The student's skirt was hiked up to her waist and Tony's pants garnished his ankles as he banged her from behind, oblivious to my presence.

She saw me.

Silently, I raised my eyebrows.

She held out one of the hands she'd clenched around the bed frame and I saw the fifty dollar notes she held. *Ah*. This was her way of supplementing her meagre student income. I touched my finger to my watch as a reminder that she had limited time for this sort of thing.

She gave a tiny nod of acknowledgement. "C'mon, Tony, baby," she murmured in a little-girl voice. "Come for me before our time's up in two more minutes and I'll give you a discount tomorrow. You can have me for my whole lunch hour for the same price as today."

He went into a frenzy of thrusting. "Fuck yeah! A whole hour for only three hundred bucks? Here I blow, baby!"

I retreated as quickly as I could before the rutting man saw me, but I heard his triumphant finale as I left the room.

I wanted to feel sorry for the girl, feeling she had to sell her body to finish her studies, but she was making a handsome profit on the sale. I wondered if I'd do the same, under similar circumstances.

I shrugged and dismissed the thought. A more important consideration was whether to report her to her supervisor. After a moment, I decided I wouldn't bother. After all, she wasn't one of my staff, nor my responsibility.

And while she was working in the ED, Emergency would be on top of the list for maintenance work.

Ten

"Did you find Tony or Lin?" Aidan asked as I returned to ED.

I nodded. "He's coming. Right away, I believe." I maintained my composure and looked at the bench where the drunk had been when I'd left. "Where'd he go?"

The door to the public toilets flew open and the man staggered out, answering my question. "I want to go home," he slurred, touching a hand to his bandaged nose.

The taxi pulled up behind him and beeped before anyone else could say anything. He stumbled outside to the waiting car.

Tony turned up, a big grin on his face, as he repaired the roof and every tap he could get his hands on. With a wink to Lin, he whistled as he left. Lin kept her eyes on the floor.

"Belinda, can you help me with something in the office?" Aidan asked, with a brief look at the students. "Call us if any more patients arrive."

Both girls nodded, standing side by side at the desk. Lin looked a little flushed, but the other girl didn't seem to notice.

I followed Aidan back to the duty doctor's office and he shut the door as soon as I'd joined him inside.

"How'd you do it, Belinda? You took over my ED and had it running smooth as satin or melted chocolate in about fifteen minutes. You even had the patients thinking I was in charge, though I knew I wasn't. How can I repay you? Let me buy you dinner. Please?" His eyes held both admiration and desperation.

Satin or melted chocolate? Unusual examples for smoothness or a hospital.

I summoned an uneasy smile. "I didn't do much. You took care of your patients and all I did was tell the nursing students what to do. Hardly worth a dinner. I'm just doing my job."

"You did a bloody amazing job. At least join me for dinner, even if you won't let me pay for it. Please?" he persisted.

I surrendered. "Okay."

His grin was fierce. "The Tanglehead again, right after your shift finishes?"

I nodded. The restaurant had just taken a delivery of bronze whaler fillets, I'd heard from the kitchen staff, and I had a taste for shark right now.

Eleven

I agreed to meet him by the front desk at the end of my shift, before heading back to my ward. The ED was empty of patients and I was only a phone call across the hospital, after all.

The remainder of my shift passed without incident, so it seemed a very short time later that I collected my things and made my way back to ED.

Rob, the orderly, manned the desk as I approached it. He looked surprised.

"Is the intern around?" I asked him.

Rob's hands tightened on the edge of the desk, his knuckles paling to bone white. "I haven't seen him for a bit," he replied with difficulty.

My eyes darted around, looking for either the intern or anyone else I could ask. Movement in the reflective office window caught my attention.

I heard Rob make a choking noise, but I paid him no heed as I squinted at the window. Beneath the desk, reflected in the glass, little Lin was on her knees with her mouth inside Rob's unzipped work pants. Against the rear of Rob's pants, Lin's hand splayed like a sea-star, over the green rectangle I recognised as a hundred dollar bill.

Busy night for the nursing student, I thought acidly, turning away to peer out into the car park. Perhaps he thought I would meet him outside? Or at the restaurant?

"Perfect timing, Belinda." Aidan entered from the corridor, his hair damp as if he'd just stepped from a shower. He'd changed his clothes, too, making me feel uncomfortable in my work clothes.

"Should I go home and get changed, too?" I asked uncertainly.

"You look lovely already. I just wanted to look good enough to be seen with you, is all," he replied with a wide smile.

Behind us, Rob choked again, though it seemed like Lin had no issue with swallowing silently.

I shrugged and walked outside with Aidan. The students were now no longer my problem, nor his. Dr Tan had started his shift, as had the night shift nurse.

We parted to enter our own cars, then drove in convoy the few kilometres to the brewery.

The restaurant was half empty this late on a weeknight, so it seemed no time at all before my steaming plate of battered shark landed before me.

Aidan slurped his way through some ribbony pasta as I savoured every bite of hot shark. I considered ordering another.

"Hell, that was quick." Aidan laughed, nodding at my plate. "I've never seen a girl enjoy her food so much before."

I returned my raised hand to my lap, deciding not to signal the waitress for another serving if it made me appear strange. I'd return tomorrow to satisfy my craving instead.

Without the observant intern.

I excused myself, telling him I was tired, before paying for my meal and heading home.

Twelve

A week passed. I passed Aidan occasionally in the corridors when our shifts coincided. On those days, he always seemed to appear in the cafeteria on my breaks. He wouldn't sit anywhere but at the same table as I did.

His lyrical voice inevitably burbled about something that made him smile. Only minimal input was required of me, so that's all I gave.

I said little and gave away less, but his interest in my company didn't lessen in the slightest. I resigned myself to his company, for it was not so unpleasant.

One morning his coffee clunked loudly to the table, the contents of the cup slopping around like the storm swell in the port that morning.

"I swear it's some kind of crazy conspiracy. Now the Nannup Tiger's broken a man's leg – or someone's pulling mine."

I looked up in surprise as Aidan slumped into the seat across from me. His hair was tufted and on end again. He took a slurp of coffee. For the first time, he looked annoyed.

"How can an extinct creature break a man's leg?" I asked calmly.

"Murray Piesse, a dairy farmer from over Elleker way. Swore he saw a thylacine on his lawn, drinking from the bird bath. So he grabbed a camera and went out into the dark after it. The beast disappeared, if it ever existed at all. Murray stumbled over a tree stump or something in the dark and broke his leg. He managed to crawl back up to the house by morning to call for help. The ambulance brought him in." Aidan's brows met over his nose as he gulped down more coffee.

"I wonder if he got a photo of it..." I mused.

Aidan snorted, then choked as he got coffee up his nose. It took him a few minutes before he could do anything but splutter, so I waited without speaking. "Do you honestly believe him? Or are you making fun of me, too?"

I wet my lips. "I believe it's possible – he might have seen a thylacine," I replied carefully. "But I'd want to see pictures or the beast itself before I'd believe it for sure."

He looked hard at me, as if he was trying to decide if I was telling the truth. Finally, he spoke again. "Thing is, if Murray really did see the Nannup Tiger, it was headed toward my place. I live next door to him in

Elleker and it's all bush except where the house is. If the beast's out there, it could be hunting my place at night, and it's just me out there."

"If you're so scared of the Tiger, don't go out at night then," I replied lightly. "Besides, it doesn't sound like the Tiger was the real danger for Mr Piesse, but the tree stump he tripped over. Take a torch if you go outside at night and you should be fine."

"I do that already," Aidan grumbled. His expression cleared. "You could come up any night you're free and watch for the Tiger, if you like. A proper stakeout. Maybe we could discover an extinct species in my backyard." He looked hopeful.

I forced a smile. "No, thank you. We'd probably just see a lot of darkness and no Tiger, or freeze if it's a clear, cold night."

"I wouldn't let you get cold. I'd keep you warm, Belinda," he replied instantly, the sound of longing in his voice.

I surged to my feet, repeating my polite refusal as I headed back to the ward. While I walked, I wondered if I'd find time to speak to Murray Piesse about what he saw. Without Aidan, I suspected I could find the creature, if it wanted to be found.

Thirteen

I had five minutes left of my break, so I decided to detour by the general surgery ward to speak to Mr Piesse, if he was up. The ward rest period was about to start, so he'd have no visitors.

The murmur of voices in his room told me I was mistaken and he did have visitors, but the curtain 'round his bed wasn't entirely closed, so I peeped through the tiny gap. I could see the white sheet and cell blanket at the end of his bed, but that was it. To see, I'd have to stand right up against the curtain.

If it really was a visitor, I needed to ask them to leave, but if it was another staff member I decided I'd return later, when he was alone.

I held my breath, stepping forward so I almost touched the cotton curtain. My eye to the gap, I surveyed the scene with some surprise.

The murmuring formed audible words now, a litany of, "Yeah baby, yeah baby, yeah baby..." as Lin, her uniform dress hiked up to her waist once more, rode her cowboy home. Through the fabric of her dress, I could see the fifty dollar notes folded into her pocket before I stepped back, not wanting to see any more.

I hesitated, torn between the welfare of the patient and my desire not to be noticed. I'd heard that Mrs Piesse had taken off to meet some American bloke she'd met and fallen in love with online, so Mr Piesse was a very lonely man. Wavering, I turned and walked away. The naughty nursing student wasn't endangering his health, nor was he my patient.

I returned to my ward, where I found a new patient had arrived, swearing a blue streak with each contraction. Jill was helping her to the birthing suite and I quickly moved to assist her.

In the ensuing birth, I forgot all about nursing students shagging patients or tigers hunting interns. A ten-pound boy was going to be born – without anaesthetic, or so his mother insisted. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Fourteen

The morning sun shone through the cafeteria window, dust dancing in its rays. I'd just received word that Miranda and her premature baby had been allowed to go home for the first time. I smiled at Aidan as he sat across from me.

He looked surprised. "So you've heard the news about the mum and baby you saved?"

I smiled more broadly and nodded. "Both are well and they've been released from hospital."

He brought a hand out from behind his back, where he'd been hiding something. "So, we should have cake to celebrate!" He placed two of the cafeteria's signature brownies on the table, the plates clinking as he set them down a little more heavily than necessary. He watched me nervously for my reaction.

I smiled and laughed. "Cake it is. Cheers." I lifted one brownie, bumped it against the other, before taking a bite of mine.

The gritty cake was still warm inside. "This would be wonderful with vanilla ice cream," I said, savouring the warm chocolate with my eyes closed. I thought of how my mother would enjoy this and resolved to find some brownies and ice cream next time I saw her in Perth. For the first time, I missed her.

"I don't think they have any," Aidan said quietly. I heard him crunch into his own brownie.

I swallowed and opened my eyes, to find him staring at me.

"I've known you for four weeks, but that's the first time I've heard you laugh." His smile was rueful. "I thought it was because my jokes weren't funny."

I smiled to soften my words. "I guess I just don't laugh much. I don't find many things funny any more."

He nodded, taking a huge bite of brownie. He had chocolate icing on his nose.

My smile remained as I finished my brownie, thanked him and finished the rest of my shift, wondering how long he'd keep his brown nose. Perhaps a kinder colleague than I would tell him he looked like a wombat.

I tried not to laugh when I met him in the corridor, perhaps an hour later. He still wore his wombat nose. I hadn't the heart to tell him about it.

Fifteen

The nursing students' last day dawned with audible relief from some of the staff, though I admit some of the male staff and patients were looking happier lately. Perhaps I was imagining it.

To celebrate, the cafeteria announced that there would be cake after lunch, so it was unusually full on my lunch break. Aidan still managed to find me in the crush, sitting across from me with a plate of curry and rice that tasted nothing like the spicy dishes that passed for curry back home.

Little Lin sauntered past and I noticed Aidan's eyes following her. I bit back a smile as I wondered if he'd used her expensive services, too.

As if he'd read my thoughts, Aidan leaned over and hissed, "You see the nursing student with the dark hair?"

I nodded once, without looking at Lin. I kept my eyes on the intern instead. I wanted to know whether my surmise was correct.

"She...she offered to spend the night with me. At my house. She...said it would only cost me fifty dollars for the whole night!" He kept his voice low, looking shocked.

I thought of all the other men she'd shagged and how much she'd charged them. "She must like you, then," I replied.

"Like me?" Aidan's whisper sounded almost hysterical. "She wanted me to pay for sex like she was a prostitute!"

"I heard she charged someone three hundred dollars for less than an hour," I whispered back. "She must have liked you, to offer you a whole night for much less."

His eyes widened as he stared at me. "She offered her...*services* to you, too?"

I shook my head, smiling slightly. "No."

Lin was deep in conversation with her supervisor, the picture of innocent bewilderment. The supervisor's red face looked furious. The two women hurried past us and out of the cafeteria. "Never...in all my years of teaching nursing...unprofessional behaviour..." I heard the older woman mutter.

Aidan paled more than usual. "Do you think she's in trouble for...for..."

I nodded once, before turning to stare at him. "Why do you look so worried? Did you take her up on her offer?"

His face shifted from white to red, into a deep bottlebrush blush. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He cleared his throat and tried again, hoarsely. "I'd never...I...NO! Belinda, you know I...she..." He swallowed and it looked like he found it painful. "You're the only person I've ever invited up to the house. No one else." His eyes seemed to be trying to convey some emotional message that I couldn't decipher.

I nodded. "I remember. You invited me to come fishing and hunt the Nannup Tiger."

He looked sad. "I'd ask you over for dinner, but I can't cook very well, so we're better off going to a restaurant if you want something to eat. We could always get a pizza or something..."

"If we got a pizza from the place in town, it'd be cold by the time we made it to Elleker," I replied smoothly, standing up. My break was over, along with our awkward conversation. So he hadn't used the prostitute's services after all. "Enjoy the rest of your shift."

I headed off to do the same. Like the nursing students, my time here was coming to a close, too. I felt a tiny tinge of regret, but banished it quickly. Once my exams were over, I could return home as a qualified midwife. Everything I'd worked for, complete. What more could I ask for?

Sixteen

Cake, speeches, a small gift and plenty of coffee. It was my farewell morning tea in the cafeteria. My practical placement was over and my assessment came with a glowing reference.

The biggest surprise was Miranda. I hadn't seen her since I'd helped load her into a plane five weeks previously. A sleep-deprived man had his arm around her and in her arms was her tiny, sleeping daughter.

"We called her Felicity Belinda," Miranda told me shyly, as the man handed me a bunch of pink flowers.

Good luck, beautiful serpent. What a name for a little girl. I smiled and thanked them both. I held the tiny child for as short a time as I felt was polite, before handing her back to her parents. As soon as I could, I intended to escape back to the ward to take care of patients. I didn't like being the focus of so much attention, particularly when I was supposed to blend in.

I shook hands and smiled back at people until I managed to retreat into the corridor, where I bumped straight into Aidan. The crushed pink flowers sent up a heady cloud of scent.

"I'm so sorry, I wanted to make it to your morning tea, but I had to finish my rounds and there was this kid in the ED who broke his arm..." Aidan was at full speed in voice and motion.

I smiled reflexively and told him there was plenty of cake. I walked past him, headed back to the ward and my patients.

"Wait," he said breathlessly. "When's your last day?"

I stopped. "Today," I answered.

"Have dinner with me again tonight?" he asked anxiously.

I shrugged. I had no plans and I intended to pick up some fish and chips again. "Okay."

"I have to work 'til five, but I know your shift finishes earlier. Can I pick you up?" He sounded so eager.

I agreed. I headed up the corridor to my ward, while he entered the cafeteria in search of cake.

Seventeen

Just before Aidan was due to arrive, my telephone rang. I didn't receive many calls, but I answered anyway.

The voice on the other end told me that my replacement would arrive early the next morning, and could I make sure I vacated my accommodation by 8 am tomorrow?

I agreed automatically. We said goodbye and hung up.

I'd intended to spend the following day on a boat, viewing the humpback whales in the ocean near the old whaling station. It didn't matter. I could leave early in the morning, before my replacement arrived, and have brownies with ice cream together with my mother tomorrow afternoon.

I began packing up my few belongings. It didn't take long. *Perhaps I should leave tonight, after dinner?* Then we could have brownies tomorrow morning.

I'd lost track of the time, so it came as a surprise when I opened the door to take my bag out to the car that Aidan was right outside.

He looked shocked. "Are you leaving already? Aren't you coming to dinner with me?"

I looked down at the bag in my hands. "I just got a call saying I have to be out of the house by tomorrow morning, instead of Monday, as I'd planned. So, I figured I'd leave after we have dinner."

Aidan's face lit up. "You can stay with me for the weekend."

I hesitated. I didn't want to share his house. It was difficult enough appearing normal for so much of my time – I couldn't manage it all day and all night.

He took my hesitation for distrust. "I know that sounds bad, but I'm staying at my uncle's friend's holiday house. It sleeps heaps of people. You'd have your own room, at the other end of the house from me. It's not like I'm asking you to sleep with me. I'm just offering you a place to stay, if you don't want to go home early."

I found my voice. "I did intend to go whale watching tomorrow. If I leave early, I'll miss out on the whales." I wavered in my desire to go back to Perth. I missed the whales so much, and they'd be calving soon.

He perked up immediately. "I've never seen a whale before. Do they really come close to here?"

I smiled. "Sure they do. There used to be a whaling station, where people killed them for their oil. It's closed now, but the whales still come to the bay where it was. Come with me tomorrow and you'll see." The invitation slipped out before I'd seriously thought about it.

His joyful smile beamed at me. "So you'll stay with me for the weekend?"

Realisation dawned that in my mind, I'd already accepted his invitation. "Okay." I reflected for a moment. "I'll just put this in the car. Then I can head straight to your place after dinner."

Aidan looked stunned. I wondered if I'd said or done something strange.

"Or I could come by in the morning..." I suggested.

His voice was breathless with the excitement that shone through his eyes. "You can come over any time you like. Tonight or tomorrow. Whatever you like."

I studied him for a moment. "Tonight, then," I decided.

After all, my bag was already packed. It was a simple matter to transfer it to the back of my car. I left the key in the meter box, where it had been when I arrived. It would be as if I'd never been there.

Eighteen

Dinner was over in a blur of warm food, beer and very little conversation.

"You don't say much, do you?" Aidan asked at one point.

I concentrated on drinking my beer. I shook my head, drinking deeply. The less I said, the less careful I had to be. I put the beer down without finishing it. I'd need my wits about me tonight.

Aidan dropped his empty glass on the table. "Do you want to go, or would you like another drink?"

I shook my head. "It's been a busy day. I'd like to go to bed early tonight."

We paid for our respective meals and headed out to the dark parking lot.

Aidan looked worried. "My place is a fair way along the bay, so it's easiest if you follow me there."

I nodded, then realised he couldn't see my response in the dark. "Sure. Lead the way."

We started our cars and I followed his tail lights along the road to the west, along the bay. After several turns, past a deli that was closed for the night, we turned onto an unsealed gravel road. I followed him, a little concerned at our remote location. He made a quick turn to the right, through a gap in the bush, and I turned behind him. In the beam of his headlights, I saw two houses set in a large lawn, which ended at the water's edge.

I parked my car beside his and got out, shouldering my bag.

Aidan fumbled with the keys, but managed to get the door open eventually. He entered first, turning on the lights, before holding the door open for me.

I stepped inside carefully. I looked at the country-style kitchen, then through the long open-plan living area to the lounge with a big open fire. The wall on one side of the room was mostly windows, facing the inlet. The wall opposite this was a row of doors, which I learned led to the bedrooms.

"Pick any room you like," Aidan said quickly. He pointed at the one closest to the fireplace. "That one's mine."

For all that he was my work colleague, I did not know this man, so I chose the room furthest from his and closest to my car. I turned on the light in a room with a double bed and one bedside table. I dropped my bag on the bed and turned the light off again.

Aidan stood outside my room, already pointing to the room next to mine. "That one's the bathroom. There's towels in the cupboard, if you need them."

I nodded. I washed up in the bathroom as quickly as I could and brushed my teeth, before returning to my bedroom and shutting the door. After a moment, I pushed the bedside table across the door.

No, I didn't trust this man.

Nineteen

I slept through the night, without hearing a bump of the door on the bedside table or much else besides.

I pulled some clean clothes out of my bag and made my way into the bathroom for a shower. Aidan didn't seem to be awake yet – I saw his door was still closed.

I turned on the shower, but the water had a slightly brown tinge to it, along with a smell that I associated with stagnant fresh water. This didn't clear, so I shrugged and took a shower anyway. At least the water was pleasantly hot.

I dried myself and dressed, before venturing into the kitchen for breakfast. I'd brought some bread with me, so I used his toaster and some of his condiments to make some toast. I settled down on the sofa with my breakfast and a book I'd picked up from the shelf.

The novel proved dull, so I was bored by the time I'd finished my toast. Wondering why any woman would want to count cigarettes and calories in her diary, I set the book back on the bookcase.

I washed up my dishes and wondered what to do. The whale watching boat was due to depart in just over an hour. *Should I drive up to the port early and wait on the jetty?*

A door creaked open behind me. I spun on the spot, in time to see Aidan emerge from his room, wearing a pair of silky shorts and a t-shirt, scratching his nether regions with one hand. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"I'm sorry, I forgot you were here," he apologised, hiding his hands behind his back. He hurried into the bathroom and shut the door. He emerged soon after, crossing the living area in quick, wide strides. He disappeared into his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

I heard him muttering to himself for a minute or two, before he emerged, fully clothed.

"Is this okay for whale watching?" he asked.

I tried hard not to laugh. "I don't think the whales care what you wear. You might want to bring a jacket, though, because it gets cold on the water." I pointed at my jacket and hat on the couch beside me.

"Right." Aidan looked determined and marched back into his bedroom.

Twenty

I agreed to let him drive to the port. I'd been laughing too hard at him in his ski clothes to see or drive. I'd never seen so much red tartan in my life. He'd switched the ski pants for jeans, but the tartan hat and coat remained.

"I like tartan," he told me with a wounded look. I wasn't sure if he was serious or joking, but my levity slowly faded.

We paid our fares and headed down the jetty to the whale watching boat. Looking from the furled sail to the small cabin, I judged the catamaran to be a reasonable-sized vessel, about the same size as a male humpback whale. I wondered if we would encounter anything larger.

There were only a handful of people on the boat, presumably owing to the cold, damp and windy weather. The whales and I didn't mind; Aidan was snug in his bright coat. The boat headed out of the port, toward the decommissioned whaling station. The vessel crew gave a commentary as we cut through the little waves, but I didn't listen to it. I suspected I knew more about whales than any of them.

I stood in the bow of the boat, face to the wind, looking for the first sign of a blow. It had been many months since I'd seen a whale...and I saw it. A blow of hot condensed air, a back curving above the surface, the dorsal fin... "A humpback! There!" I shouted, pointing.

Aidan and the rest of the passengers crowded around me, scanning the water. I watched the patch of calm water between the waves disappear, before pointing again. "There." The whale surfaced on cue. This time, his tail rose up behind him as he dove deep.

"Wow." Aidan's voice behind me was breathy and awed. I turned and smiled, before surveying the water again for another whale.

The whales surfaced and blew around the boat, to the murmured awe of the other passengers. I looked closely, but all I saw were males and juveniles, none of them as large as the boat.

The skipper mentioned something about moving to another spot, where the spotters at the lookout had seen some more whales.

The other passengers moved back inside as the boat started to move out of the shelter of the headland, but I stayed in the bow, dropping to my knees by the rail. Under my breath, I started to sing, so quiet it was barely audible to my own acute hearing.

The skipper slowed and pulled out a little plastic flute, playing a short tune before pocketing the flute again. I looked out across the water to the horizon, repeating my song.

I heard her approach, but still she surprised me. She spied above the surface, her face close beside the boat, her eye focussed on me. A tiny back broke the surface next to her, followed by a tail barely bigger than a dolphin's. Her baby was so young it was still pale grey. I sang once more and she dipped below the water again.

I held tight to the rail at the bow as she breached beside the vessel, soaking me with spray as she twisted in the air and splashed down again. The boat rocked violently, but stayed afloat. A gust of wind chilled me to the bone. I couldn't stop smiling, even as my hands turned pale blue. The other passengers moved out to the bow again and we all watched as the whale cow breached a little further away. Murmured sighs echoed around me as the tiny back and tail flicked to the surface beside her.

I nodded my thanks to her and shivered in the wind, wishing I'd thought to bring warmer clothing. I wondered if it was warmer in the water with the whale than in the wind on the boat. If only I could slip into the water unseen to find out.

Aidan was close behind me, but I didn't mind his nearness. He blocked the wind from one direction, if nothing else. I heard him unzip his coat and wondered why he'd do such a thing in this wind. The answer came as he enclosed me in tartan, his arms lightly around me.

I pulled away automatically, but stopped at the sound of his voice. Now he sounded in control. "You're turning blue. You can share my coat or you can go inside and wrap up in the foil blanket from the boat's first aid kit. If you stand out here much longer in your wet clothes, you'll get hypothermia and I promise I'll get you admitted to hospital as soon as the boat docks. Whatever you choose, I'm not going to let you freeze. I'm not a very good one, but I am a doctor."

I couldn't be admitted to hospital as a patient. I refused to sit inside when the whales were out here. That left me one option that was less repugnant than I'd thought. I struggled out of my own dripping coat and dropped it on the deck. My sweater and shirt beneath it were merely damp. I sank deeper into Aidan's coat, until my back touched his chest.

His breath tickled my ear as he laughed. "I expected you to take the first aid option inside."

"The whales are out here," I said.

As if on cue, the baby exhaled into the air and flashed its fin and tail. The whale cow lifted her back high, followed by a tail wider than the boat, as she dove deep and headed out of the bay. I farewelled her with my eyes.

Aidan zipped up his coat again, this time with me inside. He was so warm. I was surprisingly comfortable in this strange man's arms, though a contributing factor might have been how numb I felt from the freezing wind.

I didn't sing again and all we saw for the remainder of the trip were smaller humpbacks, surfacing and blowing, as they had before. I didn't mind. This was enough. Now I wanted to go back to shore and find some dry clothes. As if the skipper had heard me, it seemed like no time at all before the boat tied up at the jetty again. Aidan slid out of his coat and put it on me. He carried my wet coat as he extended a hand to help me out of the boat. I stumbled, clumsier than I could ever remember being before, as I found my feet and legs were numb. Somehow, with his help, I made it to the car. I sat in the passenger seat, almost too cold to shiver.

Aidan had to buckle up my seat belt, before asking me again, in concern, "Home or the hospital?"

"Home," I replied as loudly as I could. "There's nothing they can do for hypothermia at the hospital that you can't do at home."

"Right. Right," Aidan told himself, as he drove off.

Twenty-One

I tried to focus on the road, but my vision wavered from blurred to clear. I felt the bumpy surface of gravel and told myself we were almost home. A kangaroo came out of nowhere, bursting from the bush on one side of the road. It cleared the bonnet of the car and hightailed off into the bush on the other side.

"There goes Lucky," Aidan said.

I struggled to understand. "The kangaroo's name is Lucky?"

Aidan laughed. "Any kangaroo I don't hit is called Lucky."

I smiled, or I think I did, but I was so cold I couldn't feel if my face was working correctly.

Aidan kept shooting glances in my direction, his expression increasingly grim.

He parked his car so close to the front door it was almost on the veranda encircling the walls. He bundled me out of the car and into the house.

Once inside, he let go of me. I sagged on my feet, but I remained standing.

His fingers manically combed through his hair, so it fluffed out in all directions. "You should...go get changed. Into some warm, dry clothes. I'll start the fire and get the room heated, so you can sit out here on the sofa to warm up." He looked at me, more than a little apprehensive. "Do you need help getting changed, or will you be okay?"

I smiled, bemused. "I think I can dress myself." I ambled toward the bedroom I'd claimed. Changing my clothes was harder than I'd expected, because my hands weren't as cooperative as I needed them to be. After some time, I managed to take off my wet clothes and put on some pants and a shirt. I decided I didn't need a bra, because it was pretty useless when I couldn't fasten it. Today I was glad my breasts were much smaller than Vanessa's, because if she chose not to wear a bra, it hardly went without notice. Quite the opposite.

After some consideration, I pulled Aidan's tartan coat on over my shirt. This would hide my breasts, if such a thing was necessary.

I carefully picked my way across the tiled floor on numb feet. In the time it had taken me to get changed, Aidan had started a fire in the fireplace. The first big chunk of wood was starting to burn, orange flame darting around the edges, like small, nibbling fish.

I sat on the couch, focussing on the flames. Aidan moved from his crouch in front of the fire to the couch beside me. He helped me out of his damp coat, flinging a fluffy rug over my shoulders instead.

He stood in front of me, unconsciously washing his hands without water or soap, I noticed with faint humour. Rubbing his hands from his forearms to his fingertips, as if scrubbing up for some delicate surgical procedure.

"So, I take it you're not going whale watching again for a while?" Aidan's joke fell flat.

I looked up to his considerable height, incredulous. Why would I avoid whales? It was the wind that took my warmth, not the whale. I wished I could tell this man why such a suggestion was so nonsensical, but I kept my mouth closed. I turned my eyes to the flame-fish in the fire.

"Right." His voice was uncertain, as he walked away from me and out of my sight. I heard him moving around in the kitchen, but I concentrated on the fire, my focus on its warmth.

Aidan returned with a bottle and two glasses, clinking them down on the coffee table. He carefully broke the seal and poured a small amount of kelp-coloured liquid into the bottom of each glass.

He held onto the bottle, giving a sigh. "I was keeping this for a special occasion. I guess medicinal purposes qualify as an occasion." He didn't explain his cryptic words, nor did I care for an explanation, so I waited for him to hand me a glass. "Drink this. It'll help warm you a bit."

I judged the quantity of liquid to be a large mouthful, so I took it all in one gulp. A mouthful of fire coral would have burned less. My eyes watered as if to put out the flames in my throat, but the effort was futile.

I tried to focus on the bottle's label. Blinking, it took me a few minutes before I could see. *Limeburners Single Malt Whisky Barrel Strength*, I read, before I had the use of my voice. What lime was I didn't know, but this drink would burn anything.

"What is it?" I rasped.

Aidan took a small sip of his drink. He held it in his mouth, as if savouring the burning sensation. "Whiskey," he answered.

He looked at the bottle carefully. "Barrel strength. I'm sorry, I should have added some water."

He placed his barely-touched glass on the table and headed past me to the kitchen. He returned a moment later with a small jug of water, a ridiculously small quantity to extinguish the fire from my drink. He lifted the jug to pour some water into my glass, but stopped before a drop landed.

"You finished it all? You shouldn't have too much, not before your body temperature goes back to normal." Aidan looked worried, but poured more of the whiskey into my glass, then a tiny trickle of water. He did the same for his own glass. He handed mine back to me and carefully clinked the two together.

"To your good health," he said gravely, before taking a sip.

This time, I followed his example, taking only a tiny sip of the whiskey I now regarded warily.

It was as I suspected. The water did nothing to stop the burn, but there was flavour amid the hot sensation. I thought I tasted honey and warm chocolate. I took another sip and ventured an opinion. "This would go well with warm brownies and ice cream."

My words surprised him. He looked like he was struggling to find a reply. "I'm not giving you ice cream until you're warm again," he said finally. He set his glass down and knelt on the floor to stoke the fire. He placed several large chunks of wood in the fireplace, far more than I considered necessary. Perhaps he felt the room was chilly, or that I required additional warmth.

He unfolded to his full height and crossed the floor to me. He placed a hand cautiously on my chest at the base of my neck, where bare skin showed above the collar of my t-shirt. I met his eyes with a question, but he didn't answer it.

"You're still cold," he murmured, concern creasing lines into his forehead beneath the crest of orange curls.

I bit back the comment I wanted to make, that I would always feel cold to his warm hands. There were differences between us that I couldn't begin to categorise.

Twenty-Two

After a considerable time, Aidan seemed to make a decision. "Move over," he ordered, climbing over me onto the couch. I shifted to the edge of the seat, not sure where I was supposed to move to. Folding into the space behind me, he took hold of the fluffy blanket. "Now, lean back." I shifted back against him and he gave the rug a flick so it settled over me. He rested his arms lightly on top of the grey fuzz.

I drowsed in the warmth from him, the rug and the fire, until his voice interrupted my drift. "You can't sleep yet, not 'til you're warm. I may be a bad doctor, but I do know what I'm doing."

His words irritated me like the brush of a jellyfish tentacle across my skin. "You're not a bad doctor. You're doing fine right now," I mumbled. "I can feel my feet already."

I'm not sure he heard. "I should have taken you to hospital." His words were whispered with regret.

I gave a snort and struggled to sit up. "I wouldn't have let you. I'd have jumped into the water in the bay first." I closed my mouth and gritted my teeth so I didn't say anything else I shouldn't. I reached for my whiskey and drank some more, hoping to burn my voice past redemption. If I couldn't speak, then I couldn't say anything else stupid. This was precisely the sort of situation I was supposed to studiously stay away from. Oh, to be able to swim away. I stared at the fire, willing its warmth into my very bones.

"But I can't swim," Aidan said, sounding hurt.

Nor can I, right now. My frustration broke some barrier inside me and I fell back against him, helpless with hilarity. "You can't deal with a simple case of hypothermia because you can't swim?"

The man behind me turned rigid and his hands formed into fists. "No, I'm not a good doctor because when I'm under pressure, I just freeze up and can't think. So I let someone else help my patient, because I'm terrified of stuffing up and making them worse."

I lifted my arm from beneath the blanket and laid it across his arm, from his elbow to his wrist. I dug my fingers between his and forced his fist open. My hand was now warmer than his. "Today, you took care of a patient

with no help from anyone else. You know what to do. Maybe all you need is the confidence to take charge."

I threw the blanket off and surged to my feet. The whiskey swirled in my head, but I maintained my balance. I headed for the kitchen and a large glass of water without whiskey.

I downed the glass of water and chased it with another. Holding tightly to the bench with one hand to keep it from moving, I turned to face Aidan across the dining table. "I'm hungry," I announced, "and I don't think I can drive anywhere safely. What do you suggest?"

Twenty-Three

Dinner was the result of a rummage through the freezer for anything we could throw on an oven tray. I don't remember the food, because it wasn't memorable – simply edible.

Dessert I remember, because Aidan had brownies hidden in the back of the fridge and some ice cream stashed in the freezer. Ably aided by the microwave, we devoured warm brownies topped with vanilla ice cream, accompanied by another glass of Aidan's burning whiskey.

When I stood up from the dining table, I found I was unsteady, but I managed to stagger to the couch before falling gracelessly onto it. I watched Aidan take the plates from the dining table and dump them in the sink. His steps were more coordinated than mine; the whiskey affected him far less than it did me.

Irritated, I spat out the question that burned in my mind. "Why did you choose to become a doctor if you feel you're so bad at it?"

Aidan draped himself across the couch opposite me. He didn't seem fazed. "I didn't. I chose to be an engineer, but I couldn't get a job in Ireland. So, I went back to university to study graduate medicine, like my dad wanted. The study was easy and so was the practical stuff, at first. It's not 'til now, when people expect me to know what I'm doing and take charge, that I don't want to."

Surprised, I didn't know what to say. After a moment, I asked the next question. "So, how old are you?"

"Thirty, last birthday," he replied, his eyes on me. He looked as if he expected me to contradict him.

I was surprised – I'd thought he was younger – but he probably thought the same thing of me.

When I said nothing, he surprised me for the third time, with a different question. "So, why did you choose to be a midwife? Is it because you love babies?"

I wet my lips. Perhaps it was the whiskey or perhaps it was a growing respect for the man, but I answered him honestly, if not completely. "I was pregnant, once, and my baby was stillborn. I wanted her so much, but she

didn't survive the birth. I thought that if maybe I studied to be a midwife, I could help other mothers to avoid a similar tragedy."

Aidan's eyes were big and round. "What happened to her father?"

I was honest, if evasive. "He was long gone before my pregnancy was showing. He didn't even know about her."

"I...I'm sorry," he said softly. He poured another drink and handed it to me.

I wiped my weeping eyes with the heel of my hand, not wanting to drip salt water in my whiskey. I took a deep draught, savouring the burn in my throat. My head was swimming, all by itself.

A log collapsed in the fireplace and we both turned to look at the fire, which needed stoking. I tried to get up, but Aidan was both nearer and faster. He pushed the last remaining chunk of jarrah into the fire, before heading outside with the empty iron basket for more fuel.

A few minutes later, he returned, hefting a large load of wood. He piled the fire up with pieces of jarrah and unfolded a screen in front of it.

When he stood up, his face was red and sweaty from his exertions. "Is it warm enough for you in here?"

A considerable amount of warm inside air had swirled into the cold night each time he'd opened the door, so my first thought was to respond in the negative. His obvious discomfort made me hesitate.

"I should be okay," I replied after a moment. "Maybe you should take your sweater off so you're more comfortable."

"My sweater?" Aidan looked blank. "You mean my jumper? Sure."

He pulled the garment over his head, the t-shirt underneath coming off with it.

I stared, my mouth wide open like a whale shark. I'd seen hairy men before, but not a man with red hair all down his front, from his chest to the waistband of his jeans. Aidan's fiery chest hair had me mesmerised. I blamed the whiskey in my blood.

Twenty-Four

Aidan caught me staring. "Have you never seen a man with hair on his chest before?" he asked testily.

I didn't know what to say. "Not the colour of fire, no," I said finally.

He relented. "Back home in Ireland, it's supposed to be good luck to rub a man's red hair, like a leprechaun." He saw my confusion. "A sort of mythical creature." He took a step closer to me, still shirtless. "Go on."

I was reluctant to touch the man at all, let alone his strange chest hair, but the hope of better luck for the future got the better of me. Besides, I felt I might offend him if I spurned his offer.

I stretched a hand out, lightly stroking the wiry orange hair trailing down Aidan's stomach. He pulled away, doubling over. I drew my hand back.

"That tickles," he apologised. His expression turned to a broad smile. "Now, your turn."

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. "But I don't have any chest hair and it wouldn't be red, even if I did."

Aidan's smile turned cheeky as he continued. "No chest hair? You expect me to believe that? You must have some insulation, not to have frozen solid in the wind out on the boat today."

I shook my head. "None. Even if I did, it would be too fair to bring you any luck."

I looked away and refilled our whiskey glasses so I didn't have to look at him. I gulped the contents of mine down as quickly as I could.

"Go on." Aidan's eyes held a challenge. He turned his back to me and picked up the poker, shifting the logs in the fire to burn better.

The man was a doctor. How many chests had he seen in the course of his profession? What was one more? I shrugged and pulled my t-shirt off. My frozen fingers had been too cold to fasten a bra earlier in the day, so my chest was now as bare as his.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God!" Aidan's eyes were as round as two puffed-up blowfish.

The poker clattered to the hearth.

Twenty-Five

His gave a convulsive shiver and fixated on my face. "I never thought you'd do it! We work together. I'll get done for sexual harassment for this. I can't..." He reached for the fluffy rug and draped it across my shoulders.

I waited, but he didn't finish his sentence.

"First you ask me to take my shirt off, then you panic when I do. And we don't work together any more." I held his gaze.

Aidan closed his eyes. "What if I run into you at another hospital in the future? It's bound to happen one day. I'd never be able to look at you again, without thinking about..."

He didn't look like he was going to finish that sentence, either, so I finished it for him. "Without thinking about my chest hair?" I offered.

His eyes popped open. For a moment, he looked like he was having trouble controlling his face. Then he exploded with laughter. "A moment ago, you said you didn't have any chest hair! Now you tell me you do?"

I spread my arms wide, the blanket hanging down, like a cormorant drying its wings. "Judge for yourself. I can't have you wondering about my chest hair when you're supposed to be working."

Aidan nodded gravely. "Right, then." He swallowed and his eyes travelled down my body.

Is this what it feels like to be Vanessa, with men staring at her boobs instead of her face? This kind of scrutiny unsettles me.

"May I?" Aidan raised his hand, but not his eyes.

I shrugged.

He touched his fingers to my collarbone, tracing along my sternum between my breasts to my stomach.

I held still. "What's your prognosis?"

Aidan looked me up and down, meeting my eyes again. "I don't know. You don't have any chest hair. But you look like a shag on a rock." He started to laugh again.

"A shag?" I asked cautiously. I knew only one meaning of his word and I didn't understand the reference to a rock.

"One of those birds that sit on a rock and stretch out their wings to dry. Don't you call them shags?" He looked uneasy.

"You mean a cormorant? You're comparing me to a cormorant on a rock," I replied carefully.

Aidan swallowed. "Of course. Nothing else."

I don't believe you. "So you didn't just suggest that I sleep with you."

His voice was firm. "No." He wavered, judging my expression. "Unless you want to," he said finally.

I kept my tone level, my expression giving nothing away. "And if I want to?"

Aidan's resolve crumpled. "I need another whiskey. Do you want one, too?"

I was thoughtful. "Yes, I do."

Twenty-Six

I drifted to the kitchen as Aidan took his time splashing more whiskey into our glasses. I drank deeply from the tap, feeling the chill of the night air through the kitchen window, though the glass was closed. When I'd drunk my fill, I hurried back to the warmth by the fire.

Aidan held up the whiskey, glowing gold in the firelight. I crossed the tiles to claim mine. The floor felt like a heaving sea as the whiskey swirled within me, but I touched my fingers to Aidan's shoulder to steady myself before reaching for my drink.

His face split in a wide grin beneath his ocean-deep eyes. "I think you've had enough. What'll you give me for it?"

The whiskey must have cost him a fair bit of money, so it seemed fitting that I paid for my share of it. I shrugged. "What do you want for it?"

His smile shrank, becoming more thoughtful. "You could start with a kiss."

I looked into those yearning, deep-water eyes of a man who seemed all fire. *It's been a long time, but I think I still remember how.*

I cautiously placed my hands on the sides of Aidan's face and touched my lips to his. His mouth was open, so the draught of his breath cooled my lips for the briefest moment before I pulled away.

"Fuck that!" He strode to the coffee table and clunked the glasses down. His hands were empty for barely a moment before they were splayed warmly on my back. "Belinda. That's not a kiss."

I moved with him as he pulled me closer, one of his hands travelling up to the back of my neck as the other drifted down to the small of my back. My nipples tightened as they touched the fiery hair on his chest, yet I leaned in closer still.

He bowed his head as I tilted mine up. I wet my lips and parted them, feeling fear for the first time. *Perhaps I have forgotten how to do this. This is a stupid idea.*

Aidan pressed his mouth to mine, layering our lips as we shared a breath. His smiling blue eyes drooped to show blue-veined lids as his tongue stroked mine.

I haven't forgotten. This is new and I'm going to...I'm going to...

His shoulders were smooth beneath my questing fingers, his lips warm and responsive as I deepened my kiss. I felt his chuckle rumble through both of us, though I couldn't see him with my eyes closed. He tasted of whiskey with a hint of chocolate and I wanted more...

"Now that's a kiss."

I opened my eyes to meet his triumphant smile, softening even as I watched.

"Wow, Bel. What do I need to do for another one of those?" Aidan asked, his happiness clear on his face.

My heart swelled in my chest, like a froth of bubbles begging to be released. I laughed my merriment aloud. My smile matched his as I said, "Give me one."

The second kiss was easier than the first, for my fear and reserve had melted clear away. Not the whiskey's fire in my blood. *This fire is all mine. And I'm going to enjoy him to the fullest.*

I threw my head back to laugh, breaking his lip-lock. His chest hair tickled my breasts, inflaming more laughter.

Aidan looked at me, mystified. "You're drunk," he guessed.

I shook my head. "Maybe. I don't know. Now, isn't it my turn?"

His smile returned. "No, mine."

A slow smile spread across my face. "If you insist..."

Twenty-Seven

Aidan's hands seemed content to press me close against him. Mine explored his body – or as much of it as I could reach – but I kept coming back to stroke the fascinating fiery hair between us, sprouting between his nipples and trailing down in a narrowing ribbon to where his jeans started. My fingers itched to follow the fire-trail to its end, but the hard denim guarded my way.

I paused between kisses to catch my breath. *Please take your pants off so I can stroke you,* I wanted to ask him, but it seemed such a strange thing to say. I wasn't sure what his reaction would be, so my fingers stroked as I fixed my eyes on the offending clothing, wishing I could see through it.

"Can you blame me?" Aidan asked.

I looked up in confusion.

"You're beautiful, Bel. And a pretty fair kisser, as well. Of course you've got me excited."

I shook my head. "I was thinking that I wanted you to take your pants off." I smiled to soften my embarrassment, hoping he wouldn't be too shocked.

He gave a snort and jerked his head at me. "You first."

Without hesitation, I dropped my pants and kicked them aside. Standing in front of him, wearing nothing but my knickers, I looked up, a challenge in my gaze. "Now, your turn."

The fervour of his kiss took me by surprise, almost as much as the suddenness of the kiss itself. His fingers wove their way into my hair, sealing our lips together as if he didn't intend to let me go.

My hands fluttered at first until they came to rest on his chest, tickled by the tantalising hair. He wouldn't bare all of it for me. Irritated that I'd done as he asked and yet he kept his jeans on, I tugged at the button, framed by a tendril of tempting, rust-coloured hair.

Aidan's laughter was a vibration between us, but he kept on kissing me as his hands dropped to help mine. The button slipped from my fingers through fabric as I heard the sound of the zip. Denim scratched my skin as his jeans grazed my leg on the way down.

"God, Bel, you're full of surprises, aren't you?" he murmured, his arms tightening around me so I could feel his body was as bare as mine. The slide of warm satin against my belly told me that neither of us was naked yet, but I thrilled at the thought that we would be soon, with all that entailed.

His arms around me as if he was scared I might slip away, Aidan stumbled backwards, pulling me with him in stuttered steps. A kiss, a step, a stroke of his tongue, another step, a breath...Aidan stopped as he backed into the sofa, holding tight to me as he fell slowly onto the seat, breaking my already soft fall with his body.

His hands caressed me as his kisses grew more urgent. He circled my nipples with his thumbs, firm strokes that sent a shiver deep beneath my skin. A sound akin to a sob escaped from my throat, only to be silenced by yet another passionate kiss. I wanted...

More than kisses and somewhere more comfortable, too. Something hard and bony pressed into my thigh, so I shifted and slid a hand down Aidan's body to persuade him to shift with me. My fingers touched his smooth shorts and slid further – to the slit in the front where I met hot, hard skin crowned with hair. *Oh.*

"Hey, you know what we say back in Ireland, right?" Aidan asked dreamily, his hand closing around mine so all ten fingers were curled around him. "If you rub a man's red groin hair, you'll have amazing luck in the bedroom." He helped me stroke him slowly, once, twice, as if to demonstrate.

I fought it, but I found I couldn't resist. I burst out laughing and lifted my weight from him, placing both of my hands on my own thighs.

Aidan stuck up from his shorts like a grass tree, though a grass tree on fire. His expression held shock and hurt, yet I still couldn't stop laughing.

I climbed off him to stand beside the couch, trying to control my helpless laughter.

I sucked in a breath, a gasp and another deep breath before I could form words. "I don't know where you heard such a strange thing, but down here in Australia, it's stroking a lady that'll bring you luck in the bedroom, if you do it well enough. If not, you'll be stuck stroking yourself." I burst out laughing again.

Aidan's smile started to return. "If that's how it works downunder in Australia, I'll give it a go," he said.

My hands shook as I lifted them to take off my knickers. I hesitated, then strode to the table. Lifting my whiskey glass instead, I knocked back the contents, the burn barely registering compared to the blush I felt rising to my cheeks as Aidan's eyes fixed on me. He looked like he was drinking me, much the same way as I'd drained my whiskey. The alcohol flew straight to my head, so I sat down to deal with the dizziness. Still he stared.

Feeling self-conscious and slightly chilly, I reached for the fluffy blanket that had fallen to the floor earlier and pulled it over me.

Aidan's voice surprised me. "Don't, Bel. You're beautiful. I guess I'm still a little stunned." He knelt on the rug beside me and pushed the fluffy thing away.

I let go of it, a little less nervous now. "No one's ever called me beautiful before," I admitted.

"Then all the blokes you've been with before were either blind or stupid," he declared.

I gave a small smile. *You have no idea.*

He looked uncertain. "There have been other blokes, right? I'm not your first?"

I laughed outright. "No, you're not my first. I was pregnant once, remember?" My smile felt tight as I tried not to remember.

"Hey," Aidan's said softly, caressing my face with a kiss. "I didn't mean to bring up stuff that'd upset you. Let me help take your mind off it." He grinned. "I may be a bad doctor, but I'm bloody good at anatomy. Are you willing to let me get my hands on yours?" He reached eagerly for my chest, flexing his fingers.

I ripped off my undies, flicking them aside with my foot as his hands gently closed on my breasts.

"Do your best, for I'd like to try for some Irish luck tonight, too," I murmured, my hands doing a little stroking of their own. "Oh, *Aidan*..."

He chuckled as my thoughts settled on him and nothing else.

Ohhh...bloody good indeed...

Twenty-Eight

I woke up on the rug in front of the fire, my head nesting in Aidan's lucky chest hair and the fluffy blanket attached to my leg by some sticky substance.

I lifted my head a little to look around. My clothes were strewn across the floor, along with Aidan's. The fire had died down to smouldering coals, but the room was warm enough for this to suffice. Through the condensation on the windows, I could see that the sun had risen.

I relaxed. I had no deadlines or pressing responsibilities today. I could sleep on the floor all day with this naked man and not feel I was shirking something, except perhaps a shower.

Aidan stirred beneath me. Bloody hell, the man's whole body was stirring. My thought drifted eagerly to what he could do with it. With me. I felt his lips in my hair and his fingers gently stroking my back.

"I knew it was too delightful to be a dream. You are amazing, my beautiful Bel." Aidan's lips touched mine, in a burning kiss that felt familiar. How many kisses had we shared overnight to make me accustomed to his touch? Did it matter? *I want more...*

I shifted on top of him, so only my knees, shins and toes touched the rug beneath him. Skin on skin, except where...

Aidan gave a gasp. "How do you feel about trying for one more time before breakfast?"

I feel like I'm on fire, with a fierce blaze that has nothing to do with whiskey or the embers in the fireplace. I didn't say the words. I simply smiled and shifted my hips, as Aidan sighed with pleasure.

"Ladies first," he murmured, his hands reaching for me. The next sigh of pleasure was all mine.

Twenty-Nine

We were considerably stickier when we rose from the floor and I longed for a shower to wash the sticky sensation away. I wished also for some medication to dull the ache in my head.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Aidan asked with a smile, pulling on the red, shiny shorts.

I shrugged. "I don't mind. I'd like a shower first." I started to cross the room to reach the bathroom.

"Would you like some company?"

I stopped and turned, wondering. "I..." I began, unable to complete my sentence nor close my hanging mouth.

Aidan nodded as if he understood something I didn't and directed his eyes at the floor, his lips pressed together firmly as if he was trying to restrain laughter. After a moment, he said softly, "You enjoy your shower, Bel. Use all the hot water if you like. I'll make you some breakfast for when you're finished. I'll have a shower after we've eaten, when the tank's heated up again." He took a step forward.

He reached out and curled his hand beneath my jaw, as if checking my heartbeat with his fingers. Cautiously, Aidan touched his lips to mine, opening them to prolong the kiss as I leaned in closer, my tongue darting out.

Last night's passionate fire was nothing to the rapid acceleration of my heart-rate now. From Aidan's response I knew he could feel my pulse racing beneath his fingers. His free arm closed on me as my own arms reached around him to pull his body closer. A furious flurry of lips and tongues that left me breathless and panting, yet still wanting more. My chin resting at the base of Aidan's throat as I paused for breath, I gasped out words without thinking.

"Yes, I'd like you to join me in the shower. Please."

Aidan chuckled, stroking my hair as he said, "Sure. Give me five minutes and I'll come join you. The water should be nice and hot by then." He gave me one last lingering kiss and crossed the living room to his bedroom.

Dizzy with excitement and adrenaline, I stumbled for the bathroom, longing to feel the flow of warm water over my skin and his.

Thirty

I twisted my hair up in a knot on the back of my head as the cold water hissed and pattered into the bathtub beneath the shower head. It was barely above freezing as I stepped into the spray, slowly heating until my skin warmed once more in the water. When steam rose to the ceiling from the shower rose, I turned to stick my face into the stream.

A slight movement in air current told me Aidan had entered the room, for I didn't hear the door over the noisy cascade. His hands on my waist were warm as he pressed his body to my back, kissing my neck from behind. "Beautiful, Bel. You're so beautiful," he murmured.

Aidan reached for the soap and worked up a lather of foam between his hands, rubbing the bar in front of me for what appeared to be an inordinate length of time. Clinking the bar back into its dish, Aidan's breath tickled my ear. "For letting me share your shower, the least I can do is help you wash." His foam-filled hands cupped my breasts, gently massaging my skin until I relaxed against him. "That's better. You were so tense it was like you were worried you'd sprout tentacles as soon as you touched water!" Aidan laughed at his own joke but I merely smiled, closing my eyes as I enjoyed his caresses.

My skin tingled as Aidan's soapy hands slid down my belly to the length of my legs, all the way down before all the way up to my bottom, until he reached for the bar again. With a handful of foam, Aidan's firm fingers smoothed the tension from my shoulders and down my back. As he reached around me for the soap again, he murmured in my ear. "Stand with your feet just a little further apart..."

I slipped a little in the soap-slick bathtub, so Aidan's arm closed firmly across my chest to steady me, holding my body against his.

Now better balanced, I complied, my eyes on my toes as his foamy fingers reached between my legs and inside me. Without his strong support, I'd have crumpled to the floor, for my legs felt more like the consistency of gel and not bone, as his intimate caresses concentrated on the spots where I was most sensitive. And he knew, *he knew*...

The wordless cry I heard could only have come from my lips, but I couldn't remember uttering it. I could only focus on Aidan's hand as a louder cry tore its way out of my throat. I tensed in anticipation.

"Relax, Bel. I've got you." As if to illustrate his point, Aidan's arm tightened across my breasts as his fingers drove deeper. My voice sobbed his name, not once but over and over, my tipped-back head resting on his supportive shoulder.

I couldn't stifle the hoarse scream that ripped from my throat, for only a moment before it was muffled by Aidan's mouth as he bent his head to kiss me, his hand clenched between my trembling thighs.

I lifted my head as we both loosened our respective grips. I turned to face him, still lost for words as sensation lingered.

Aidan's face looked as stunned as I felt. "God, you're full of surprises, Bel. I almost came just watching you."

Not just watching, my sluggish thoughts stirred. *Stroking and circling, sliding and slipping, strong hands that sensed every stutter in my breath, every shiver of my body...*

I groped for the soap, not sure what I was going to do with it but determined to at least attempt to respond in kind. "Irish luck," I murmured, one hand reaching for him as the other closed on the softened soap. I was so intent on stroking Aidan to his increasing pleasure that I dropped the bloody bar into the bathtub.

"Bugger," I muttered, bending over to pick up the soap.

Thirty-One

In my clumsiness, I almost slipped again, saved only by bumping into Aidan's body. His hands at my hips steadied me as I reached for the bar again.

"Bel...do you want me to..." he began, but didn't finish.

"It's all right, I think I have it," I interrupted brightly, straightening with soap in hand. I worked to lather it to foam as fast as I could, turning to take my chances with his Irish luck.

No longer a grass tree on fire, now he resembled a sentinel stone, surrounded by frothy sea-foam from waves breaking at its base. A rock warmed by sun and the water that washed him. I paused to admire my soapy handiwork, but he shrank before my eyes.

"Fuck!" he swore. "Sorry, Bel, that's the last of the hot water." He squeezed past me, wincing as he rinsed his body in the now near-freezing water, before turning the taps off.

Aidan stepped out of the shower and reached for the towels, tossing one to me. The fabric felt warm, as if heated. I looked at him in surprise.

He laughed. "Heated towel rail. Otherwise they wouldn't dry in this weather. Now, if you want to turn shrinkage into swelling again, a little stroking should fix me, what with your warm hands and all..." He moved in closer for another kiss. I felt him stiffen slightly in the close contact. He evidently felt it, too. "See? You work wonders, Bel."

I smiled, unsure what to say. My stomach betrayed me with a gurgle. I was hungry for several things at once.

Aidan laughed again, responding with a lighter kiss. "I should make you some breakfast first. I wouldn't want a wonderful woman like you going hungry." He hung his towel back over the heated rail and walked naked out of the bathroom. The muscles in his bottom shifted with each step, revealing a tantalising tuft of red hair between his cheeks.

I hastily did the same with my towel so I could follow. After the steamy atmosphere in the bathroom, the chill of the kitchen struck me more forcefully than the cold water. I felt my breasts tighten as if they, too, were shrinking away from the cold. I reached for the nearest item of clothing –

Aidan's coat, draped over one of the dining chairs – and slipped it on, holding it closed with my crossed arms.

Aidan stared at me, as he donned some clothing, too – a flowery apron that covered his front but left his bottom bare. "How about I fry you up some eggs for breakfast?" he asked with a wicked smile. He bent over to remove a frypan from a low cupboard and I found myself staring at his bum and what dangled so temptingly beneath.

"Should I help?" I asked doubtfully, as he strode around the kitchen, pulling out implements and ingredients.

"I can make you breakfast, Bel. You relax." Aidan smiled.

I sank into a dining chair, pulling my knees up to my chest to keep more of me warm inside Aidan's coat. I was so intent on Aidan's nether regions that I didn't realise his eyes were fixed on me, too. I smiled, embarrassed but rueful.

Aidan shook his head. "I still can't believe you're sitting in my kitchen, wearing nothing but my coat, letting me make breakfast for you. I feel like I'll blink and you'll disappear."

"Me either," I admitted.

He flipped eggs onto plates, salting them liberally before passing me some cutlery and an egged plate.

I swallowed the eggs as quickly as I could, barely tasting them, until my stomach was sated. I craved a different sort of satisfaction and my eyes strayed to the likely source of it, so the finger he slipped inside me beneath the table took me by stunned surprise. I straightened and tightened as Aidan slid his finger out again, with more difficulty than it had entered. "Still so wet, I see," he said.

Cutlery clattered as I dove for him, intent on finishing what we'd started in the shower. Beneath my fierce kisses, he murmured words that I didn't hear until his hands pushed my breasts away. "Bed. Bel, I'd like to take you to bed."

I shed the coat and stood, as he struggled out of the apron. Kissing and stumbling, caressing and gasping, we crossed the living area to his bedroom. The bed pressed against the backs of my legs and it took only a slight push to tip us both onto the slippery sheets. *Red satin, like last night's shorts*, I thought incoherently, my hands sliding over the fabric as Aidan's fingers were far more productive.

I could feel the ripples building for another powerful orgasm as Aidan asked, "What do *you* want, Bel? How do you want me?"

I crossed my legs around his hips, my feet pressing insistently against the bum I'd admired over breakfast. My voice came out in a sob. "In me. In me. *Now.* Oh, Aidan...*Aidan*..."

Thirty-Two

Some time later, when the sweat-saturated satin stuck to my skin and our Irish luck had well and truly wilted – at least for a few hours, Aidan assured me – I lay beside him. My heart still racing as I tried to catch my breath, I couldn't resist Aidan's kisses as he lightly stroked my skin.

"Thank you, my amazing, beautiful Bel," he murmured, stretching as his head hit the pillow beside me.

"Shouldn't I be thanking you?" I responded lazily, my skin feeling pleasantly raw in places from the frenzied friction of our lovemaking.

His laughter shook the bed. "I'm pretty sure you've expressed your loud appreciation already."

I blushed, feeling my already warm cheeks grow hot. "Am I too noisy?" I whispered, mortified.

Aidan turned, his face hovering above mine. "If you screamed for joy at the top of your lungs every time you came, you'd never be too loud for me, Bel. You'd only make me want to hear you scream again." He kissed my neck, lifting his leg to stroke mine beneath his.

His caresses had very little effect on him – nor did my hands help. He sat up. "A couple of hours, Bel, and I promise I'll be ready for you again. Is there anything you'd like to do while we're waiting?" He seemed on the cusp of saying more, but he didn't.

I shook my head, contenting myself with stroking the length of his red chest hair, from top to glorious bottom.

"On the Sundays I'm not working, I usually go up to the Distillery for lunch. Taste a whiskey or two and have something to eat..." He trailed off, his mouth still open. A moment passed before he continued. "I'd love to take you out to lunch, if you'll let me. I think you'd enjoy tasting the whiskeys, too, if you liked the one we shared last night." He looked worried. "But if you don't want to..."

I reflected. "I think you're right. I would like to." I summoned a smile that came easily to my lips. "But I think I'll need another shower and some clothes."

"Let me help you," Aidan offered eagerly.

I shot him a questioning glance.

His smile was broad, though I didn't trust it entirely. "Oh, this one will be very clean. Plenty of soap and this time we'll be in and out before the hot water runs out," Aidan promised.

Trustworthy or not, I shrugged. I wanted this man's hands on me. Whether his intentions were dirty or clean were of no consequence.

Thirty-Three

My skin tingling from Aidan's thorough ministrations in the hot water, I reluctantly dug out some clean clothes from my bag. I pulled on my knickers and I stretched my arms behind me to fasten my bra when I noticed Aidan standing in the open doorway, for I no longer saw any point in hiding from him as I dressed.

His appreciative smile widened when he knew I'd seen him. "Red," he said, gesturing at my matching underwear. "I like it."

I smiled. "Me, too," I admitted, holding up the similar-coloured shirt I planned to wear over my ruddy underwear.

Aidan reached for me as he took slow steps into the room. His hands cupped my breasts through the cloth. "You're irresistible in or on red satin, Bel," he murmured before he kissed me.

After some minutes, when all too soon we broke for breath, Aidan took the shirt from my hand. "You should put this on, or I won't be able to keep my hands off you." He helped me pull it over my head to cover my bra, before curling his hands around me again.

"Does it help?" I asked with a smile.

Aidan's expression wavered for a moment before he replied, "No. I know what's under your shirt and I can't stop thinking about them. I'll just have to try to restrain myself."

My laughter bubbled up and out, at the sheer determination in the man's expression. "It's all right," I said suddenly, realising as I stared at his shirt. "I'll be restraining myself from stroking your chest, too."

Both of us laughing now, Aidan folded me into a more-than-welcome hug.

"Ah, Bel," he whispered, touching his lips to my hair. "You should get some pants on so we can go, or we'll be here like this all day."

We exchanged a lengthy glance as we undoubtedly shared the thought that an all-day embrace was hardly undesirable.

"You'll really like the whiskeys and the food's good, too," Aidan said half-heartedly.

My stomach made its presence known with an obscene gurgle.

"Ah, don't let me be so selfish, keeping you from eating lunch when you're hungry. Here." He reached over and snagged my jeans from the bed. "Put these on and some shoes and we'll go."

Reluctantly, I pulled the jeans on and fastened them, slipping my feet into my shoes so I'd be ready.

I took a quick glance at my reflection and realised what I'd forgotten. "Wait. I just need to brush my hair."

Thirty-Four

Time turned tangled seaweed to smooth satin that Aidan wanted to stroke. Instead of restraining my hair as I normally would in a knotted bun or braid, I left it loose down my back.

As if I needed more encouragement, Aidan kept murmuring, "Beautiful. Just beautiful, Bel," each time he reached out to touch my curtain of hair.

"Do I look okay?" I asked, concerned.

Aidan looked me up and down as I scrutinised his clothing. He wore the same as me – jeans and a shirt, covered by a thick jacket. I cinched the belt of my coat tighter around my waist, avoiding the intensity of his gaze. His scrutiny still made me feel nervous.

"Like I keep saying, you're beautiful, Bel. No one will notice I'm there, if I walk in with you." Aidan held out his hand and I took it. "Let me drive. That way, you can drink as much as you like and I'll make sure you get home. Well, to my home, at least."

We headed out to his car. The seats still smelled of salt from my soaking yesterday.

We encountered no kangaroos on the drive, though the birds seemed out in force, fluttering through the watery sunlight filtering through the trees that lined the road.

He slid the Mini into the last spot in the parking lot. I hesitated, looking around, wondering how many of the townspeople would be inside the Distillery building.

Aidan's arm snaked around my waist, clamping me to his side. "It's all right, Bel. There'll still be plenty of food and whiskey left."

Still uneasy, I walked stiffly inside with him.

The room was packed. Bar stools, tables, chairs and sofas were all occupied by people. A fire rippled like a wave in the heater, flickering orange and blue through the sooty glass, and the room burbled with conversation and laughter. There was no place for us, except at the tables on the veranda, in the cold air outside.

I slipped from Aidan's embrace. "I'll go find us a table," I said, gesturing toward the veranda.

He nodded, pressing his lips together as if he was trying to squash unsaid words or laughter between them. "I'll get you a drink. Anything particular you'd like to eat?" He waved his hand at the menu.

I shrugged. "I don't mind. Whatever looks good." I meant it, too. With so many people around, I wasn't sure I'd taste a bite. I'd be watching them too warily, wondering and worrying and wishing I wasn't part of such a crowd.

I crossed to the veranda door and found a table on the decking that was half-hidden from the window, sitting so I'd be out of sight to the people inside, but in clear view of the door when Aidan walked through it. The sun touched my hands on the table, a faint whisper of warmth when compared to the wonderful man I waited for or the whiskey he'd bring me.

"Bel? What are you daydreaming about?"

My eyes flew open to see Aidan smiling at me, glasses in hand. I smiled right back, able to be completely honest. For once, I had nothing to hide. "You."

He set the drinks down and leaned across the table for a kiss, his tongue lightly caressing mine. He tasted of whiskey already. "I'm sorry, I started without you. Just a sip," he said, the slightest of apologies in his eyes.

I looked at the glasses on the table. Somehow, I had a lot of little ones, held together on a wooden board, not a single large glass like last night. Aidan had a similar board of glasses before him.

"A tasting paddle," Aidan offered. "With slight samples of what they have available for sale at the moment. We can enjoy these until our lunch is ready." He touched a finger to the tiny glass on the right end of the platter. "This is M79, the one that set you on fire last night."

I looked into his eyes at these words, eyes of blue fire, like the flame on the gas stove he'd cooked my breakfast on. Unlike this morning, I restrained myself to another kiss across the table, without throwing the rest of my body after it. When I slowly pulled back, I replied, "Then I'll keep that one 'til last."

Talking about each glass as if it held fruit, grain, herbs, smoke and soil, instead of golden brown liquid, he pointed out which to try. Try as I might, I couldn't taste all of the things he described in each glass. I'd never eaten soil nor smoke, but I didn't like those that supposedly contained them, either.

Yet after each glass was empty, I found I preferred the taste of the contents on his tongue, in yet another table-top kiss. When only one tiny glass of fire remained, a woman brought a tray to the table, containing the

food Aidan had ordered for us. The tantalising smells wafting from the plates set my stomach complaining once more, so I took a fork and seized the nearest morsel to pop into my mouth. The wine-coloured slice of sausage proved spicier than it first appeared, so I coughed and choked until I reached for a glass of water to extinguish the unpleasant fire. I came up dry. There was no water – only the whiskey I wanted for later.

I staggered to my feet and coughed out something about getting a drink, pointing vaguely in the direction of the bar.

"Are you okay?" Aidan asked, worried.

I smiled and nodded between coughing as I tried to hurry inside.

At the bar, I had to wait behind some people who were tasting their way through paddles like mine. With some curiosity, I watched them as they cautiously sipped each glass. The women pulled faces, but the men seemed to be practicing blank expressions with each mouthful. I wondered whether it was the whiskey or the women that made them behave so strangely. Still I waited.

After some discussion, one of the men bought a bottle of whiskey, wrapped in a paper bag and tucked under his arm, as the group strode out of the Distillery.

I stepped up to the counter. "I'd like a big bottle of water and a bottle of the last whiskey on the tasting paddle."

"The last one? M79? The prices are here," the barman said smoothly, pulling a sheet of plastic-coated paper toward me. He turned away to find a bottle of water and some glasses to go with it.

He clinked the bottle and glasses to the counter, then looked at me expectantly. My expression mirrored his, as I waited for the whiskey bottle. "And the whiskey?" I asked hoarsely.

He hesitated. "You did see the price..." he said as he pointed at the last line on the page. The number on the end was close to my weekly salary from the hospital.

Perhaps I should have hesitated, too, but I knew Aidan didn't earn much more than me. And he'd chosen to share his expensive bottle of whiskey with me last night. The least I could do was replace it. I glanced at the window, where I could just see Aidan's back as he sat outside, waiting for me. He looked lonely. Silently I extracted my credit card and held it out.

"A bottle of the M79?" the barman asked, again, just to make sure.

I nodded once and extended the card further. Perhaps if I replaced the bottle, he'd permit me to have a little more of the first bottle tonight...

The barman bustled around, pressing buttons on the little machines to process my payment, before handing me the bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. With another glance outside, I tucked it into my bag. I'd surprise him with it later.

I picked up the water bottle and glasses, stepping slowly to the door outside.

Thirty-Five

"What are you doing sitting out here alone? You should come join us." I recognised both Jill's voice and the woman herself, even though she wore her casual clothes and not her hospital uniform. She blocked the doorway to the veranda.

"Ah, I'm..." Aidan began, half turning in his seat to face her.

Jill nodded slowly. "She left for Perth early yesterday. Cleared out of the house without a trace. Forget her, Aidan. She's gone."

Aidan's face twisted, as if he wasn't sure what to say or what expression he should wear. My heart twisted, too, in response to his obvious pain.

"She's the ice queen. Calm and collected in the most stressful of procedures, but a heart of ice in everything else, too. She was too cold for you to touch, Aidan. You should come inside and join us, instead of sitting here alone."

Me. The ice queen was me, a name I'd heard used for how precisely I could handle a difficult birth. It meant more than I'd thought. Cold that could shut out Aidan. *Not any more.*

I pushed the door open wider, excusing myself as I slipped past Jill with my eyes on the ground.

"There you are, Bel," Aidan said in relief.

I lifted my eyes to his face and met his relieved smile with my own much warmer one. *Too cold for him to touch? Don't you dare say that about Aidan.* I leaned down to kiss him as my hands placed the glassware on the table.

His lips touched mine in what he seemed to think was only going to be a perfunctory peck, but I persisted, lips parted and tongue poised, until he realised I had something more passionate in mind.

A minute or maybe three passed before I pulled away, to the sound of Jill's uncomfortable cough. I turned to face her, my hand clasped tightly in Aidan's. "We sat outside because it was a bit too crowded inside and we wanted to be alone for a bit." I smiled down at Aidan, the look in his eyes returning every drop of my warmth for him.

Jill sounded uncertain. "Well, there's space for you inside, if you two want to come in and join us." She retreated inside to the fire.

I kept hold of his hand as I slid into my seat. With my spare hand, I took another piece of the spicy sausage and popped it into my mouth. Now I was prepared for it, the burn was barely perceptible.

Aidan snorted and poured us each a glass of water. He gulped his down, before saying, "You should try some of the chicken, too. And the spring rolls, before I eat them all."

I did as he suggested, but I barely tasted any of them. I ate until I was full. All that remained was the chocolate whiskey.

Aidan didn't say a word 'til I'd finished eating. He just watched me, with a rueful smile on his face. When I was done, he asked, "Would you like to go inside, by the fire, with everyone else?" His eyes held yearning, but also understanding.

He wants to go inside, to the room full of people.

I hesitated. "I..."

"I usually sit on the sofa near the fire – most of the other regulars are happy to let me have the same spot, every week. We can sit in a corner, as far away from everyone as possible, if you like, or we can claim my spot by the fire. If they won't make space for you, you can sit on my lap." He grinned wickedly.

I felt lost. I didn't want to go inside and be the centre of attention.

Somehow, Aidan understood. "Or we can stay out here in the cold, if that's what you want," he added gently. "Let's have the last sip of whiskey." He lifted his tiny glass and clinked it against mine, before taking a sip.

I don't like the cold and I want to be warm with him. Wherever that may be.

I looked up into his eyes as I drained my glass. Chocolate fire on my tongue, I leaned across the table to kiss Aidan again. I didn't want the kiss to end. But it did, as his cold fingers touched my neck.

"Let's go inside," my voice said of its own volition. *I want your hands as warm as they were on my skin this morning.*

I pushed away from the table and stood up, stepping forward to stand by Aidan's side. He curled an arm around me and kissed me briefly. "Thank you, Bel," he murmured.

My heart swelled. "You're welcome," I said slowly, for the first time. His arm a comforting weight around my waist, I led the way inside.

Thirty-Six

As Aidan's hand rhythmically stroked my hair, I leaned my head against his shoulder and let my mind drift. Conversation washed over me like waves on a beach, but no comments were addressed to me and I had no opinions I wished to express. I was content, for the first time in as long as I could remember.

"Did you catch last night's footy game?"

"The Barkers lost two lambs last week..."

"The wife'll be at me if I don't chop some more wood for the week..."

"I'm thinking of trying a sour mash, like the Americans do. Not sure what I'll call it..."

"The Tans got a new Landcruiser yesterday."

"So, you never did tell us what happened to that midwife, Aidan," a voice said, bringing me back to the conversation.

I looked up to meet Aidan's eyes, gazing down on me. He bowed his head to kiss me before he answered, his eyes not leaving mine. "She warmed up to me after a while," he said softly with a broad smile. I felt my own lips lift to match his.

I sat up straighter and we shared a longer kiss, oblivious to the questioner or his conversation. I heard the veranda door squeak open, but I didn't turn to see.

"I'll go get some more wood for the fire. Wouldn't want you two lovebirds getting cold." The door squeaked again until it banged shut.

People began to murmur goodbye to Aidan and slowly shuffle toward the door. Aidan responded to everyone by name, while I summoned a smile and a nod for each one. My smile didn't seem so stiff any more, surfacing easily and staying on my face.

Soon it was just Aidan and I left. "Should we go?" I murmured, raising my eyebrows.

Aidan shook his head. "Ben's getting more fuel for the fire. We should at least wait 'til he gets back."

As if on cue, a voice from behind me asked, "Where's Ben?"

"Outside getting more wood," Aidan replied.

"That shouldn't take him more than five minutes. How long's he been gone?"

Aidan shrugged. "Maybe twenty?"

The barman crossed the room to the door. "I better go find out what's taking him so long." The door banged behind him.

"Just us." I smiled at Aidan, whose hands began to caress more than my hair and my face. His kisses turned more passionate, too, with no intention of stopping soon.

Running footsteps on the veranda ended in a protesting squeal as the door was ripped open.

"Doctor...Aidan..." the man gasped between breaths, both hands clamped to his chest. "Ben. Need a doctor."

Thirty-Seven

I leaped to my feet before Aidan, my hand closing over his to pull him up beside me. "What happened?" I asked urgently, striding behind the man as he led the way to the woodshed. I didn't let go of Aidan's hand and I heard his stumbling steps as he followed us.

"I don't know," he said. "I went in and he was just lying there. He's dropped a load of wood all over the floor and he's lying on the ground. I came straight back here for help. After all, Doctor Aidan's closer than the hospital."

I glanced at Aidan, whose face had gone pale. His hand tightened on mine as he realised he'd have an emergency to deal with – the one thing he hated most.

I started humming under my breath, the song a soothing lullaby I'd wanted to sing to my daughter. The same song I sang when I drove my car with Miranda bleeding in the back. It helped to calm me, if nothing else.

Aidan's grip loosened and his strides lengthened so he walked beside me instead of following behind. Both my hands free, I automatically twined my hair into a knot on the back of my head. Practical once more.

We approached the open tin shed and stopped. The barman lifted his hand and pointed. "He's in there, lying on the floor." He didn't seem to want to go back in the shed at all.

I glanced at Aidan again, taking a step forward, but he got there first, ducking his head to go inside. I skittered inside behind him, moving out of the doorway so I wouldn't block the light.

I heard his breathing as soon as I stopped moving, so I knew Ben was alive, but he lay on the ground, his eyes open and unseeing. Aidan knelt beside him, checking for head and spinal injuries or some sign of why the man was paralysed.

I edged around the two men, searching the woodshed. Big chunks of timber were scattered on the floor, as if they'd been swept from the carefully stacked pile that took up more than half the shed. Movement caught my eye and I stepped closer to see better and make sure.

"What's wrong with him?" the barman asked nervously, sticking his head inside the shed door.

"I don't know," Aidan murmured at the same time as I said, "Snakebite."

The barman burst out laughing. "When it's near freezing outside? The snakes are all asleep – too frozen to bite anyone!"

"Can you get the first aid kit from inside, Mark?" Aidan asked quietly. "And call an ambulance, too, mate. If he's not conscious, we need to get him to hospital. If they want more details, bring the phone out here and I'll fill them in on what I know."

"Sure, Doctor Aidan." The barman grinned and trotted off.

"Bel..." Aidan began.

I shrugged. "I'm a midwife, a nurse. You're the doctor. They expect you to take charge and you are. They won't listen to me while they have you."

"No," he said urgently, with a firmness in his tone that made me stare at him. "Why snakebite, Bel?"

"Check his hands, his wrists – he didn't wear gloves and she was probably asleep in the wood. I think he woke her up and she defended herself," I replied.

Aidan stood up, looking around in panic. "But where's the snake?"

I touched the toe of my shoe to the block of jarrah nearest me, a striped tail just showing beneath it, stirring sluggishly. "She's here, trapped under some wood."

Aidan's eyes were wide. "What kind of snake?"

I turned my head to look more closely at her. "Tiger snake, I think."

Aidan's arms pulled at me, trying to put distance between us and the poor stunned snake. I shook my head and pulled away. "Help Ben. Find the bite marks and tell the ambulance officers. Do your first aid and get him safely out of here. When he's on his way to hospital and some antivenin, I'll let the snake loose."

Aidan gave a nod of understanding and attended to his patient. "On his wrist – here. Right into the vein." He pointed at the tiny puncture marks, wiping away a trickle of blood.

Not a moment too soon, for the barman appeared. "First aid kit!" he announced, holding out the box.

Aidan's voice was calm and methodical. "Get me a pressure bandage – I think he's been bitten by a tiger snake that was hiding in the wood pile." He held out a hand expectantly.

The flustered barman fumbled through the first aid kit and held out a bandage, his hand shaking. I crossed the shed in two strides and took it from him, ripping open the packaging to hand the bandage to Aidan.

He wrapped Ben's arm tightly, from the visible bite marks on his wrist up past his elbow, before Aidan demanded and was given more bandages.

The ambulance officers didn't take long, for their station wasn't far away, and it seemed like no time before we heard the sound of the ambulance siren. Mark left to guide them to the shed.

"Tiger snake bite. Swab the area and get some antivenin in him straight away," Aidan ordered. "It's been half an hour since the bite – you need to act fast, as he's already showing some signs of paralysis."

The ambulance officers nodded fervently as they shifted Ben to a stretcher and into the ambulance. Both turned to Aidan, to ask if he wanted to accompany them.

For a moment, Aidan hesitated, but he slid an arm around my waist instead. "No. I'm not on duty this weekend. And I've had a couple of whiskeys. Raise the on-call doctor on the radio and have him meet you at the hospital. I think Lachlan's on today."

The paramedics nodded again, before climbing back into the ambulance with their patient and heading off.

I ducked into the shed while the two men watched the ambulance. I moved to the other side of the block of wood, where I could see the snake's head. I looked into her open eyes. She was short, but fatter than most tiger snakes I'd seen. I nodded carefully at her, humming my daughter's lullaby for luck, as I touched my foot to the log trapping her coils. With a flick of my foot, I rolled the wood toward me, releasing her. She slithered away with difficulty to the darkest corner of the shed. "Take care, little one," I murmured to the small snake, who looked as if she was about to give birth. She'd had a precious burden indeed to defend from Ben the distiller. She disappeared into the darkness beneath the wood pile.

I left the snake in her shed and joined the two men, who hadn't noticed my absence.

"He'll name his next whiskey after you, Doctor Aidan! You saved his life!" Mark beamed at Aidan.

Aidan shook his head gravely. "No, I think Ben should name his next whiskey after..."

"The snake," I interrupted with a forced smile. "He should name the whiskey after the snake that bit him!"

"Tiger snake it is!" Mark laughed, sounding giddy.

Aidan glanced at me and I smiled, moving to his side. His arm circled me again as he kissed me. "Time to go home, Bel?"

I nodded, fighting to hold my smile in place.

We both bade Mark goodbye and walked slowly to Aidan's Mini.

Thirty-Eight

It wasn't until we were back on the road to his house that Aidan asked, "Why didn't you speak up for yourself, Bel? You knew exactly what to do there. If Ben names a whiskey after anyone, it should be you. You saved his life."

I smiled gently. "People want to hear it from a doctor, not a midwife. If he'd gone into labour, then they'd have listened to me. Besides, you had everything under control."

Aidan persisted. "But...the snake! I never even saw it. If you hadn't, then it might have been too late when he got to hospital..."

"You listened and that's what matters. You saved his life, Aidan, not me." I smiled again, brighter this time. "And I'm sure Mark the barman is happily spreading that story right now. Enjoy it, Aidan. This is what you're capable of doing."

"Thanks to you. Only with you," Aidan replied, taking his eyes off the road to stare at me.

I wanted to meet his eyes, but one of us had to watch the road. "Watch out!" I shouted, in time for him to avoid the kamikaze kangaroo by swerving onto the wrong side of the road and back again. The words stuck in my throat. The reply I wanted to make but couldn't. *Aidan...*

Aidan's eyes remained glued to the road for the remainder of the trip back, as did mine. No more kangaroos tried to kill themselves or us. Lucky lived for another day.

We reached the house and Aidan reached over to caress my face, pulling me in close for a passionate kiss. And another. I didn't want to move, nor leave the car, relishing the closeness and comfort this man brought.

A third kiss came to a close and Aidan pulled away. "Let me get the fire going and we can continue this, uninterrupted," he begged.

"I'll help," I replied quickly as he led the way to his own woodshed. I didn't trust the snakes to leave him be for me without me there to remind them.

Together, the work went faster, as we filled a wheelbarrow load of wood for the house and headed back for another. I stacked the wood as Aidan

constructed something complicated on the hearth with paper, sticks and small kindling. He touched a flaming match to the creation and set it alight, much like he did my heart. I watched him for a moment, as his eyes danced with reflected flame. *Fire on water...*

Aidan turned and smiled at me. "Let's wash up and then the one thing I want to do most is get you out of those clothes."

I returned his smile, still a little shaken. "Same," I admitted, trying to match his light tone.

Thirty-Nine

"Spread those lovely legs for me, Bel," Aidan murmured between kisses as his lips moved down my breasts. His hands caressed my thighs as I willingly complied.

"Let me show you how grateful I am for what you did today." His words confused me as his lips distracted me, travelling lower until they tickled my inner thigh. More confused than ever, I tried to pull away.

"Bel," he began, his hands stroking where his lips had been only moments before. So close, almost teasing me, for I knew what he could do with those hands. I shifted again, so my legs were wider apart than before. "I'd like to taste you."

"What?" I sat up quickly, staring at him. My body shifted from aroused to afraid, as if I'd plunged into cold water. "You want to...what?" My alarm grew.

"To taste you, my beautiful Bel," Aidan murmured, touching his tongue to my skin. A slow lick until I stiffened at the sensation, from my nipples to my spine. I'd never felt anything so strange.

Aidan laughed, looking up at my face. "Look at you, Bel. I'd think you'd never..."

I shook my head, not sure how to tell him I had no idea what he meant. Fifteen fumbling minutes in the back seat of a car with a man whose name I never knew hadn't prepared me for whatever Aidan wanted to do to me now. I felt fear.

"Aw, Bel, I'm not going to bite you," he began again, still laughing. His laughter died as he realised he'd guessed my thoughts. "Hey." He sat up, too, on his knees between my legs, pulling me to his bare chest. "I thought you'd like it. Don't freeze up on me again, Bel. Please." His voice held an urgent entreaty.

I slowly relaxed into his embrace, telling myself I was being silly. "I'm not the fucking ice queen," I mumbled, the words slipping out before I realised I'd spoken them aloud.

Aidan's laughter rocked us both as he stroked my still-knotted hair with one hand, gently undoing the knot to let my hair down once more. "That's

right, you're not. You're warm and wonderful, my beautiful Bel." The stroking stopped, before resuming a moment later, slower and more intimate. "Just like in that amazing shower we took together this morning..." His fingers were deft, reminding me. He kissed me deeply, taking my gasp as he took me to the cusp of a climax. "I love you, Bel."

I shouted his name, my body shuddering, almost drowning out his heartfelt words. Yet I clung to him, too, aware of every syllable and every sensation he inspired in me. I wished I had the breath to reply in kind.

Aidan held tight to me, murmuring in my ear. "Now, if it's all right with you, I'd like to do with my tongue what I just did with my fingers. I think you'd enjoy it. But it's up to you, Bel. I just want to hear you scream my name like that again."

I struggled for breath. "Is...are you...as good with...your mouth...as with...your hands?"

"Better." Aidan kissed me as the growled word faded into the air. Slowly, he leaned me back until my head rested on his satin-skinned pillow again.

Our lips parted and he smiled. "Shall I?" He dipped his head to touch his tongue to my nipple, delicately caressing the pink skin until it tingled.

"Yes," I whispered uncertainly, closing my eyes.

A gentle kiss touched my mouth, before Aidan chuckled. "I won't hurt you, Bel. I just want to pleasure you – any way you'd like. Anything you want me to do. Just name it." His hands caressed my breasts and belly as he moved. His next kiss was equally gentle, though considerably lower. "Relax, Bel."

I tried, but from the first swipe of his tongue I was lost to the electrifying sensation as Aidan set my every nerve alight with the fire of his love. Lust. Ah, maybe both. And mine.

I surrendered to his skill.

"Oh, Aidan...*Aidan...OH!"*

Forty

Day darkened to night and I made love with Aidan. We felt no hurry, nor desire to stop. He was a sweet lover, for all his fire. Like mixing his fiery whiskey with cool water, our time together was enhanced by our joining. His every caress felt burned into my skin, yet I burned for more. *Oh, Aidan...*

I didn't sleep on the floor by the fire that night, nor barricaded in the bedroom nearest the bathroom. I shared Aidan's bed and slept beside him on satin, when we chose to sleep. And when we didn't...I ached for more.

That night, I woke in darkness, thirsty for water. I disentangled my body from Aidan's embrace and padded to the kitchen. Through the kitchen window, I spied movement on the edge of the lawn, where trees and bush met grass. I held still and watched. Keeping low, a large, striped cat, the size and shape of a greyhound, stalked the edge of the bush. Her ears pricked at the slightest sound and once her head turned so she looked right at me. She froze, as did the two tiny cubs at her paws. With such small young, I knew her den must be close by. As I met her gaze, I nodded slowly. Her secret was safe with me, as long as she did not betray any of my secrets. She and her cubs flitted between two trees and were gone. The Nannup Tiger lived and she was not alone.

I quenched my thirst with tap water, before returning to Aidan's bed. As I slid in beside him, he stretched an arm across me to stroke my leg.

"I thought you'd disappeared and maybe I'd just dreamed you." His hand curved around my thigh, slowly moving upward. "Would you like to inspire some sweet dreams to see us through 'til morning?"

I could take sleep or sex, but I knew that when morning came, I'd be driving home. The burning fire our passion kindled tonight would be cold soon enough. Fire could not burn forever. But it could burn for one more night. And oh how I burned for him now.

I stretched and spread out, as his fingers slid inside. My breath hissed out in response, as a far hotter snake thrust into a welcome home.

Sleep could wait.

Forty-One

I lay on my side, facing Aidan, sated and sleepy. My fingers still stroked his chest hair, even as he started to snore.

Rain drummed on the roof, washing away with it my willpower to leave. With every passing moment, more and more I wanted to lie beside him 'til Monday morning dawned. Just one more loving encounter and I'd leave, I told myself, but I lied.

I loved this man too much.

The sky started to lighten and still I stared at him. I leaned over him, holding my breath, and brushed my lips lightly across his.

One last kiss. No more.

I had exams tomorrow and a long drive home today. Were he awake, he'd tell me to go, to become the qualified midwife I wanted to be. Did I still want that?

Of course, I told myself. All this effort for a qualification. That was why I was here. Aidan wouldn't ask me to throw that away. Two weeks, is all. I could return once I finished my exams.

And tell him the words I couldn't say.

Sticky and smelling of sex, I should have showered. Instead, I savoured Aidan's smell on my skin. I dressed and packed up my things. The brown-bagged bottle of whiskey clinked as I lifted my bag, a reminder.

I lifted it out, torn between giving it to Aidan as I'd intended or keeping it for myself, to remember him.

I will return to drink it with him, so I'll leave it here. I folded the bag and slid it like a notecard beneath the bottle. Taking a pen from the desk, I carefully wrote two heart-felt words:

Thank you

It seemed like so little when he'd given me so much, so below it I scrawled three more:

I love you.

With one last glance at the room where Aidan slept, I left his house, forcing every step I took to my car. The sooner I left, the sooner I could return.

And I'd never have to leave again, as long as he lived.

Forty-Two

The sun rose on my tears, but I kept my foot on the accelerator as my car drove north. Away from Aidan, though I ached for him still.

When I reached Mother's house, I was tired from my long drive and voluntary sleep deprivation. I dropped my bag in my room and trudged wearily to the kitchen, where she sat at the dining table, reading a book in the afternoon sun.

"You'll need to go to the chemist's to get a pregnancy test," Mother stated, not lifting her eyes from her book.

"Why, who needs one?" I asked.

"You," Mother answered. She closed her book and laid it on the table. "I thought you were going to wait until after you'd completed your studies to try for another child." She smiled as if she already knew what my answer would be. I wouldn't have been surprised.

"I received a particularly attractive offer that I found I didn't want to refuse." I hadn't yet dared to let myself hope that Aidan had given me a healthy child, though I would have traded everything for her. Maybe even him. I shook my head. Her hopes flew too high for me. "I don't even know if I can have another child. If I can...that will change everything." I stood, stunned, looking at a future in my mind that I hadn't foreseen.

Mother's smile grew wider. "What was it about him that made him so attractive?"

I couldn't help but smile in response. "He had fiery red hair. Everywhere." I shrugged, not wanting to discuss Aidan in detail with Mother. "It's only a few weeks until I finish my final exams. I'll take the test afterwards," I said, opening the fridge in search of a drink and a desperate change of topic. "Do we have any whiskey?"

"Whiskey?" Mother asked, looking up. "You can't drink that if you're carrying a child." She smiled again. "Your father had red hair, too."

"Oh." I closed the fridge and poured myself a glass of water instead. I'd left him only this morning, yet I missed Aidan's fire so much.

"What was the man's name?" Mother's eyes looked far away, into some memory of the past. Idly, I wondered if she'd ever loved a man as I did.

"Aidan," I replied.
"How was your practical experience in Albany?"
I smiled. "Highly educational."

Forty-Three

The pregnancy test sat in its plastic cover, while I waited the ten minutes that felt like ten times that. Time ticked away possibilities in my head.

Duty or freedom?

Love or loneliness?

Aching or Aidan?

Warmth or chill?

Back to the life I knew or the thrill of change?

A child or forever empty arms?

"Have you decided what you'll do next?" Mother asked, standing in the doorway.

I shook my head. "It all depends on the results of this."

Mother gave an understanding smile. She would advise me, but we both knew the decision was mine alone.

"You know what will happen if he discovers your secret," she began. Her tone held warning. "You know what you may have to do."

"If I'm carrying his child, the decision is out of my hands," I replied firmly.

"And if you cannot conceive a child?"

A tear slid down my cheek, but I remained resolute. "Then I will make my choice. And I might not choose to return home with you, Mother."

She gave a solemn nod and I knew she understood.

"The men I loved both died. It's a hard decision to make."

I remembered the moment the aching started – when I left Aidan's bedroom. It hadn't ceased since. My lips longed for his, my fingers itched to stroke him and my breasts ached to be held in his hands once more. My tongue burned for the fire on his.

Oh, Aidan...what I'd give to be back in your arms tomorrow. Destiny be damned.

The timer trilled and Mother graciously left me alone. My time was up.

I picked up the plastic test, pressing my lips together as I peered down to see what it said.

EPILOGUE

"Is it time to go to the whales yet?" Zerafina asked, almost bouncing in her eagerness.

I roused myself from my memories. I didn't often think of Aidan, for five years had passed since I had last seen him, but I tried to keep the memory fresh.

"Almost, sweetheart," I replied. "Give me a moment."

I closed my eyes and wished the young doctor a healthy and happy life, the least he deserved for kindling a fire that would never go out. When fire and water mix, they create something extraordinary and new, but they cannot survive together. *I'm sorry. Sirens do not stay with humans, especially not when...*

"Come on, Mummy! I see one!" Zerafina squealed, as a thick, curly lock of red hair blew into her mouth in the strong winds. She spat it out again before darting off in front of me, toward the approaching whales. Her fiery tail glinted in the morning sun as she flicked it furiously to increase her speed.

I sighed and dove through the water after her, my golden tail rippling in a more leisurely fashion, with far more power than my daughter's. I resolved to venture on land in the near future, to drink a glass of whiskey and toast the health of her father, whose fire could never survive beneath the ocean's surface as my people did.

After all, Aidan couldn't swim.

The next book in the series is *Ocean's Gift*, which you can get HERE.

HALCYON:
An Alien Scifi Romance

DEMELZA CARLTON

Book 1 in the Colony: Aqua series

Catch a siren. Stop the storm. Whatever the cost.

Allie, sick of war and grief, signed up as a lowly maintenance worker for the Colony in the hope of securing a lasting peace between the Titans and Humans. However, the girl has her own secrets, not least of which is her assignment from the New Hope government to monitor the Colony for signs of a suspected saboteur.

Galen, the only survivor of the *Poseidon* shipwreck, didn't join the Colony for peace. He wants vengeance on the siren Halcyon, the mysterious Mer whose terrorist tactics single-handedly killed more Humans than any other Titan. His sources say that Halcyon is on New Hope, and he'll happily kill every Mer in the Colony until his parents' murderer is dead.

Can they catch the terrorist before the Colony is destroyed?

CHAPTER 1

On a planet far from home, a solitary siren sped through the wine-dark sea toward her quarry, swifter and more deadly than a long-extinct shark. Her target, a Human ship, lay becalmed in the waves. Almost as if it expected and awaited its fate.

Halcyon the siren paid no thought to the ship's passengers or crew as she hauled herself up the *Poseidon*'s anchor chain to the deck. She listened for one voice and one voice alone – a prisoner the Humans had taken. A civilian they had no right to take.

As she stalked the deck, she lifted her voice in song. Humans heard and fell into slumber. Those who already slept sank deeper still. Deadly music echoed along the passages as she passed, until she heard a pained gasp, followed by, "Halcyon, dearest, you should not be here!"

Halcyon wrenched open the hatch that was all that lay between her and her husband. Except that the man she beheld no longer looked like her husband, for all that he spoke with Ceyx' voice. The bloodied piece of meat strapped to a table before her didn't look like a man at all, let alone a living one.

"What have they done to you?" she whispered, reaching out to touch the man she loved.

The homunculus coughed, bringing up more blood, which he spat on the floor. "Tortured me for information, dearest. They think me one of them, and a traitor. My research – " He coughed again, more thickly this time. "My research is what they wanted. Human and Titan genetics. They are the same. The same, dearest. We can breed with them and they with us. Worse, if they work out how to bestow Titan powers on their own, they will annihilate us. That is why they tortured me. I refused to experiment on them. To work for them. I will not be a part of – " A deep, hacking cough seized him, leaving him gasping for breath that he was unable to draw from the air.

An eternity passed in a moment, as Halcyon was forced to watch her husband suffocate to death, like a fish out of water.

Her blood boiled within her veins. Titans were violent, yes, but none would dare harm one of the Mer, let alone attempt to torture one. Not like this. Not knowing what one siren could do to thousands of them.

Halcyon scanned the room, her fingers itching to show them what she thought of such despicable tactics. Her gaze lighted on a slumbering Human, almost hidden under a bench. Sleep was a luxury he would never know again.

"Wake," she commanded him, first in her language, then his own when she got no response. The ignorant Human didn't speak Mer, so she would speak in English, and in pain. Both languages he would understand before he died.

The man blinked, patting down his lab coat that looked so much like the one Ceyx once wore to work. No more.

Halcyon ripped the plastic name tag from the man's chest. "Get up, Doctor Claudius Tasker. Did you do this?" She pointed at Ceyx' corpse.

"The traitor wouldn't talk," Tasker grumbled.

"So you tortured him?" Halcyon demanded. "A doctor. A healer. You caused harm that killed him?"

"I had to. The traitor wouldn't cooperate," Tasker said.

His last words. Halcyon screamed, a wordless sound that didn't need words.

Tasker clapped his hands over his ears, but it was already too late. Blood streamed from his eyes and nose as Halcyon hit the precise frequency that made every blood vessel in his head burst. The man dropped to the floor, as dead as Ceyx.

But one life was not enough. Ceyx would not want his research to become widely known, especially among Humans. That meant destroying all knowledge of it on this ship. In data banks. On paper. And inside Human heads.

A bereaved siren's grief knows no bounds, and a siren seeking vengeance for murder would make her fury known. She was the storm no Human could escape.

Halcyon raised her voice again, louder than before, as she marched with gruesome purpose to the bridge. There, she found Humans sprawled all over the floor and the consoles, but she didn't need to wake them to find

what she wanted. She had spent six years studying Human technology, as her husband sequenced their genetic code.

She turned on all the pumps, flooding the ballast tanks with seawater until it sloshed into the cargo hold and overflowed into the lower decks, too. She would send Ceyx to a fitting grave in the ocean depths, and all aboard the *Poseidon* would rest with him.

When she dived from the deck into the waves, the ship sat so low in the water she could reach over the gunwale with her hand. Not for long. The *Poseidon* sank beneath the surface, leaving only a single floating lifeboat to mark its existence. A lifeboat, where there was nothing but death.

And Halcyon, who would exact a siren's vengeance from all the Humans who had summoned the storm by daring to steal her husband from her, even as she cried an ocean of tears for his loss.

Neutrality was a luxury for other sirens who had not lost a lover to the barbarous aliens. Now, for the first time in living memory, a siren went to war.

CHAPTER 1

Ten years. Ten long, hard years, he'd worked and waited for this. Ten years since the night the *Poseidon* sank, drowning all the family a teenage apprentice engineer had left. At the time, he'd thought the three weeks he'd floated in a lifeboat at sea were forever, vowing vengeance on the copper-coloured fish tail he'd glimpsed in the dark, swimming away from the sinking ship. Galen grinned at his own naiveté. War had wised him up quickly to the world he lived in, or the Altan system, anyway, as he stood on New Hope today for the first time, staring up at the soaring domes of his Colony home like all the other new colonists, Human and Titan alike.

Since the war ended, he'd gradually learned to see Titans as more than just the enemy. Four years ago, he'd have itched for a weapon at the sight of the family in front of him – shifters of some sort, he figured, given the fur some of the children sported, which couldn't be comfortable in this baking heat – but now he just felt a sort of aching envy. Not for the parents, but for the kids. He'd had a family once, and he would have liked to show his father how he'd turned his passion for tinkering with things into a career that put him in charge of managing the environmental controls of this incredible facility. His dad had never understood how Galen didn't want to be a doctor like him.

His mother...she would have admired the dome, for she'd had a technical bent that she'd passed on to Galen, but she would have been more impressed at the possibility of peace between Titans and Humans, cooped up in the Colony. If his mother stood by his side now, Galen might have been tempted to believe it, too, but peace was a pipe dream. As long as one Titan lived who kept on killing, there would never be peace between their peoples.

Halcyon. One Mer was to blame for so many deaths, including those of his parents, Claudius and Panacea Tasker. He'd been chasing the bitch for a decade, always too late to see any more than the carnage she left in her

wake, but now he'd finally struck it lucky. To a terrorist like her, the Colony would be the ultimate prize, because destroying it would mean an end to peace. Through his contacts, he'd discovered that she was believed to be among the colonists, which meant if he signed up, he'd have five years to search for her. Five years where she couldn't get away. After that time, when she was as dead as his parents, maybe he'd be able to look at Mer without hating them. Maybe.

Staring around at the mostly humanoid crowd sweltering in the packed tunnel that led from the shuttle to the Colony, he wondered how the Mer would enter the Colony. Would someone wheel a huge water tank out of one of the shuttles, and drag it into the Colony to the Aqua Dome? He hoped to be inside by the time that happened. He'd only ever seen one Mer in his life and it had been her. If he saw the copper-coloured tail that had haunted his nightmares for a decade, he'd dive into that tank and try to kill her with his bare hands. Hardly a good start to what was supposed to be an experiment in peaceful, mixed-species living.

Mixed species...he'd heard rumours of a bonus the Senate would give to any couple who produced a mixed-species child. As if such a thing was even possible. Even if they were able to breed (which he strongly doubted – wasn't that what made a species a species? They could only breed with their own kind?), just the thought of wrestling a slimy, fishy-smelling Mer into his bed...and where did you put it? Did she have some sort of trapdoor in her tail, or did she spawn like fish, so all a guy had to do was squirt into a bathtub where she'd laid her eggs and...ugh. It was enough to turn Galen off sex for life. Sex with fish was bestiality, tits or no tits. Period.

He shivered, trying to forget her and just focus on the moment. He stood in a queue that stretched so far from the Colony entrance he couldn't even see it yet, but he knew it was there. They all did. Somewhere at the end of the line was a door that led to the hope of a better life. Hope hung in the air like humidity – a hot and cloying security blanket you believed with all your might would keep the monsters at bay.

Galen wanted to believe it. If his hunt for Halcyon meant that no other child would wake up orphaned by a war he didn't want and would never understand, then it was worth it. He'd do anything it took to catch her, because the end justified the means. Any means. As long as it resulted in her end.

CHAPTER 1

Allie shivered as she stepped into the Colony. For the queues forming up down in the cargo bays, the warmth she'd found so welcome would be a catalyst for fights breaking out. Short tempers in the heat...she didn't envy the Watch today. Especially not with the shuttles vomiting their humanoid cargo out faster than the Watch could process them, poor people.

So Allie summoned her brightest smile for the woman wearing a freshly-pressed Watch uniform. "Good morning, I'm Allie," she sang out, holding out her bag for the customary search before the woman could ask. She began humming a cheerful tune.

"Violet," the woman said. She took Allie's bag and rummaged through the contents. After little more than a cursory examination, Violet looked up to meet Allie's gaze. "Who brings a bag full of chocolate as their only personal items for five years?"

Allie winked. "Someone who appreciates life's pleasures."

Violet's expression softened into a smile. "A woman after my own heart."

Allie became aware of an alluring floral scent that intensified. "And you smell...absolutely enchanting, Violet. You're a succubus, yes?"

Violet nodded curtly as uncertainty filled her eyes.

"I've never known one before, but I'd like to. Come visit me in the Arena Dome one day when we're both free, and I'll share some of my chocolate, if I have any left." Allie rattled off her apartment number to the surprised succubus.

"But...how do you know where you'll be staying? You don't have your accommodation assignment yet," Violet protested.

Another wink. "I was part of the team who did the final structural checks on the Colony. I got a peek at accommodation assignments before they were finalised. Anything goes wrong at your place, you'll know who to call."

Violet nodded and waved Allie on to the next Watch officer, a Human male who introduced himself as Henry. Several minutes later, armed with her new tablet and a map she didn't really need, Allie boarded one of the waiting aircars to zoom her to her apartment in the ring surrounding Arena Dome. This was the last time she'd see Metropolis empty. By tomorrow, the place would be bustling with activity as all the new businesses started up. She sincerely hoped there'd be a chocolate shop somewhere. Hmm, perhaps she should have chosen to live in the Nyx Dome, where the products wouldn't melt quite as quickly as in the Arena Dome.

Speaking of which...

The first thing Allie did when she entered her apartment was to empty the contents of her bag into the refrigerator. Even the concrete floor was warm underfoot in this dome – lovely. And she had a window to the outside, just like she'd requested. A window that stretched across the ceiling from one end of the apartment to the other. More than a lowly maintenance worker had any right to expect, but those who'd put in the extra time during construction had been promised extra credits for their efforts. She'd refused the cash in lieu of an apartment with a view. And what a view. She threw her head back and stared up at what looked like the whole galaxy. New Hope's barely-there atmosphere meant there was nothing to obscure her view of the stars. Beautiful. She couldn't wait to watch the night time show through her skylight. It had been a long time since she'd had the leisure to simply lie back and watch the stars.

Allie debated whether to lie on her bed and rest while she had a chance, or head back to the entrance to watch the new colonists arriving and help where she could.

Plus, she'd be on hand to deal with any maintenance requests. Other people might not start their new jobs until tomorrow or even next week, but like the Watch, Maintenance staff were on call the moment they set foot in the Colony.

She should probably activate her communications device now she was here, too. Allie had only a moment to register that she had four messages before her comm alerted her to an incoming call.

"Hiya, this is Allie," she answered breezily.

"Is this Maintenance?" a male voice demanded. "We've just arrived at our apartment and there's ice all over the floor."

Allie reached for her tablet. "Yes, sir, I'm Allie from Maintenance. Can you tell me your apartment number in the Nyx Dome, please?" She jotted down notes as he talked, shaking her head at the sloppiness of the staff who'd inspected Nyx Dome. She'd had a wager with Ira that her first call would be from Nyx Dome. When she felt she had enough details to head over to fix the problem, she said, "I'll be right over, sir. I'll have your ice rink uninstalled in no time." She terminated the call. Time to get to work.

Whistling, she summoned a skimmer and set off for the snow.

CHAPTER 1

After what felt like forever, but was probably only a few hours, Galen stepped into the cool air of the Colony.

"Put your bag here," a woman in a black Watch uniform instructed.

Galen slammed his bag on the table, folding his arms as he waited for her to conduct her search. He didn't know what she was so grumpy about. She looked and smelled fresh as a flower, while he'd been standing in the hot tunnels below the city for hours behind that family of shifters that stank of the worst kind of musk he'd ever smelled. He'd heard about skunks, but he'd thought they died out back on Earth. Evidently the Titans hadn't killed their smelliest species off. Just like they tolerated Mer among them, knowing what they could do.

The woman took her time with his things, removing everything from the bag and inspecting the lining before she replaced everything, one item at a time. Everything except one thing. "What's this?" she asked suspiciously, holding up the first device Galen had ever created.

He reached for it, scared she'd drop it, but she stepped back, keeping it out of reach. Galen's arms dropped to his sides. "Please be careful. That's my...it's a music player. When I was a kid, I made it out of spare parts from the ship, so I could listen to the old Earth music my mother brought over with them. Those are the earphones, so only I could hear it, and it wouldn't disturb my parents while they were sleeping." He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "It's all I have left of my family. They were killed in the war."

Her eyes searched his, as if reading more than just what she could see. She gave a little nod. "What kind of music?"

"All the classics from Earth, my mother said," Galen replied, spreading his hands. "Want a listen?"

She allowed him to place the earphones on her head, and closed her eyes when the music began to play. She stayed that way for a long moment, before gesturing for him to remove the earphones, which he did.

"It's not bad," she admitted, her lips lifting in a tiny smile. "Did you really make that?"

Galen nodded. "It's pretty rough, and I could probably do a lot better now, but it does the job. Nothing like as complex as this Colony here, though. I expect this place will keep me too busy to build toys like this. I'm the environmental engineer, so it's my job to make sure everything here works."

"Not just yours. I met one of your Maintenance crew this morning. A very nice Titan." She grinned widely, then hastened to add, "Not that there's anything wrong with Human, of course, but..."

That made the Human-looking woman a Titan, too, Galen guessed. He knew it was rude to ask, but he wanted to know what kind of creature she was. He worried that she was one of the ones who could read minds, even despite the implant he wore that was supposed to prevent that, though he'd never had a chance to test its functionality until now. He touched the scar behind his ear for reassurance. Of course it was still in place. Whether it worked, though...

The woman's eyes turned cold. "You'll pick up your accommodation and work assignment over there. Stay out of trouble, Human." She pushed his bag toward him and directed her attention to the next person in the queue.

Galen received his accommodation assignment and everything else he needed from a man he was almost certain was Human, but he still wouldn't have bet a single credit on it. Not even with the fifty thousand credits he'd been given when he accepted this assignment. If he made it through the duration of this strange social experiment in the Colony, he'd use his government payoff to fund his own company, inventing things. But that was more than five years away. After he'd completed the mission he'd been working on for a decade.

The Watch officer cleared his throat.

Galen realised he'd been daydreaming again. "Sorry, what did you say?" he asked.

"That one's headed to your dome. Take that aircar to your apartment," the man said, waving him away.

Galen squeezed into the packed aircar. The door slid closed behind him and the vehicle took off.

The trip was long enough for him to get a good look at his fellow travellers. A few Humans, a grey-skinned man whose attention was focussed solely on a particularly hypnotic girl who seemed too beautiful to be Human, and a large patch of dense mist that the others gave a wide berth. Peering closely into the fog, Galen thought he could discern a pair of eyes. He became certain of it when one of them winked at him.

"He looks like he's never seen a ghost before," the fog remarked, thickening until Galen could make out four distinct figures, all of them laughing at him.

He drew himself up. "Well, I haven't. I grew up on a Human planet and I was too young to fight in the war. There's lots of kids like me back home who have never met a Titan before. I figure if we're all going to be neighbours for a few years, I better get used to it, and quick."

Somehow, his matter-of-fact statement managed to kill all conversation in the aircar as it sped through the Colony to what Galen recognised from his initial briefing as the Nyx Dome.

So he had been given his first choice, then. The cold dome where no Mer could swim, so he'd be safe from them. Maybe it was childish, but Galen didn't care. Being able to sleep safely at night without fear of attack meant a lot to him. After all, he still had occasional nightmares about waking up alone in his cabin on the *Poseidon*, his headphones in his ears, the music drowned out by the emergency sirens blaring the ship's death knell. He'd stumbled onto the lifeboat with nothing but the music player, and the hope that his parents would be waiting for him when he was rescued. A forlorn hope, for sure. He'd been the only survivor from the *Poseidon*, and to this day, he still didn't know why. Had Halcyon chosen not to kill him, because he was a child, while slaughtering everyone else? If so, she'd made a huge mistake that day. That child was now a man, and one who wouldn't let anything stand between him and vengeance for his parents' murder.

The aircar announced his apartment number.

Galen unclenched his fists and stepped out of the aircar. It zoomed away, leaving him alone in the corridor outside his door. Outside what would be home for the next five years.

Galen took a deep breath, palmed open the door, and stepped inside.

Only to discover the apartment was already occupied.

"...I repeat, restrict temperatures within all living spaces to a lower limit of two...no, make it five degrees above the freezing point of water. Anyone

who wants lower temperatures than that will have to apply to Maintenance and only if appropriate insulation is fitted to all the apartment's pipework will it be allowed," the woman said. A floor-cleaning robot hummed around her feet, siphoning water off the floor.

An electronic voice protested, "You do not have authorisation to impose controls on all living spaces, or this one. Resident number – "

"Space that!" the woman snapped. "My authorisation is ALI-407102 Maintenance override. Stick that up your circuits and do as you're told."

Galen liked her already.

"Processing," the recorded voice replied. "Authorisation confirmed. Any further orders?"

"Give me a damage report. How many apartments are affected by the burst pipes?"

A pause, then the electronic voice said, "Just those on this side of the inner ring of this level. No other apartments had sub-zero temperatures for an extended period."

The woman sighed, her shoulders relaxing along with her voice. "Good. I want temperatures matched to those in 407 until the ice has melted in all affected apartments, and I want floor cleaning robots activated in all of them. Get me every Maintenance worker we have in the Colony, and a load of replacement pipes. This is urgent."

"Implementing orders now," the voice said.

As if on command, the communications device on Galen's wrist sounded an alert.

The woman whirled around, so her surprised eyes met his. She wasn't more than a girl, really, despite her authoritative orders to the building management AI. Yet her dark eyes seemed to x-ray his soul, if he believed in such a thing.

Galen tried to shake off the effect of her hypnotic stare. Did that make her a Titan like the Watch at the entrance? "How many apartments have burst pipes?"

Her eyes widened for a moment. "Enough to keep me busy all day. Some idiot set these rooms to temperatures below freezing, without realising that some other idiot had forgotten to insulate the water pipes against freezing. Probably someone who'd never seen snow before, or what ice can do to pipes. My money's on a stupid ship-born Titan." Her brows drew so low they nearly met over the bridge of her nose.

Hating Titans made her Human, then. Just a really pretty one. Galen blew out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Human and his type and here. Whoever she was, he wanted her.

"Aren't we supposed to be trying to get along?" Galen said. "You know, us and the Titans, now the war's over?"

The girl snorted. "Oh, sure. The war's over and we live under a peace treaty, so we're not supposed to kill each other, but there was nothing in the treaty about banning stupidity. So I guess we'll just have to live with that."

Galen laughed. She wasn't stupid, that was for sure. "I'm Galen," he said, extending a hand in greeting. "I'm supposed to be the environmental engineer responsible for the Colony, and while I don't think I've officially started work yet, I think your AI just conscripted me." He pointed at his comm. "I've changed a few pipes in my time. I did my apprenticeship on shipboard environmental systems. Nothing as state of the art as this place. Our ship was falling apart, cobbled together from spare parts and scrap metal in the first place. You'd replace one thing, only to find something else had fallen off while you were working. I can handle pipe replacements."

Her cool fingers meshed with his as she shook his hand. Her eyes lit up. "So you're the genius engineer Ira told me about. I thought you'd be older." Her mischievous grin did things to Galen's insides.

"I'm twenty-four, and I've been working as an engineer for a decade. Plenty old enough to know what I'm doing," Galen snapped to hide the tumult inside. She couldn't be any older than he was. In fact, she looked younger. And she was a Maintenance worker, which made her his subordinate. "How many apartments need replacement pipes?" he repeated.

The girl lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "Answer him."

"Fifty-two, not including the two already repaired," the electronic voice said.

"Twenty-six each, then," the girl said. She flashed another impish grin. "How fast can you fix pipes, genius? Want to wager something on it? Loser has to make the winner dinner."

How had she known he'd wanted to ask her to dinner? Galen shook his head. She hadn't. "You're on. One condition, though."

She raised her eyebrows, waving for him to continue.

"Tell me your name."

She let out a peal of laughter. "Sure thing, Galen. I'm Allie, and it's good to have you on board. Genius or not, anyone who can fix pipes is a good

man in my book." Allie winked. "I'll go left, and you go right. I already fixed the pipes in your next door neighbours' place. A wolverine shifter family. Good thing the ventilation's still working well."

Galen watched her head down the corridor, unable to take his eyes off her.

Allie glanced over her shoulder. "Staring at my arse won't win you your wager, genius. Nor will it get you any closer to getting your hands on it."

Feeling his face grow hot, Galen turned away, but not before he heard her laughter ring out down the corridor. He had to win this wager, he swore. His reputation depended on it.

And maybe more besides, he thought, envisioning what she looked like without her standard-issue coverall. One day he wanted to find out how well fantasy matched the reality.

CHAPTER 1

Allie hummed as she connected her final replacement pipe. She'd encountered a few new colonists during her repairs, but this apartment's occupants, like the people who'd move into the others in this ring, were probably still queueing up in the cargo bay. She told the AI to make the temperatures comfortably cool in the apartments she'd worked on. Now the ice was melted and cleaned away, no one would ever know about the damage to their new homes.

Well, except Galen and Ira. And that shifter family who'd reported the ice in the first place.

"How many pipes does Galen have left to fix, Col?" Allie asked, unable to resist.

"Three," the AI replied. "I do not understand your need for pet names."

"Col," Allie repeated, spelling the word out. "Short for the Colony. It's what I'll call you. It feels too impersonal just shouting at the walls without a name. Now you have a name, I can pretend you're another very helpful person in the next room."

"Illogical sentiment," the AI said.

Allie laughed merrily. "Yep. That's why you're an AI and I'm not. Don't ever change, Col. Now, how long do you think it'll take Galen to finish work? I don't want to embarrass him by showing up early. The poor boy is supposed to be my superior. He should at least feel like it on occasion."

"Forty-three minutes."

Allie whistled. "That long? I wish I'd brought a book." She thought for a moment. "Can you bring up footage of the arrivals area on the main screen in here? The occupants of this apartment won't be here for an hour or so, right?"

"The shuttle carrying the sasquatches has not yet landed," the AI said. "The apartment will be vacant for an estimated six hours and twenty-six minutes."

"Mine for the moment, then," Allie said, sanitising her hands before pulling out a ration bar. "Arrivals area, on screen."

She sank down on the floor to watch the colonists oohing and aahing over their first glimpse of the Colony interior as they entered Metropolis. Titan and Human alike looked just as awestruck. Maybe Ira was right and their two peoples weren't as dissimilar as they appeared. That's why this huge social experiment had to work. Allie would do everything in her power to help it along. She craved peace more than even chocolate. Peace meant no more loved ones would die, and maybe, just maybe, she could let her crushed heart love again after so many losses.

Even if there was no one left in the system for her, at least she'd have the satisfaction of knowing others could find love, and keep it. Take young Galen, for example. It was only a matter of time before he found the right girl and persuaded her to share his quarters. Then the two of them would work on repopulation like rabbits, the hopping creatures she'd seen someone unloading into the agricultural dome.

Lucky boy, to have such a future. Allie had no children, but now she had no partner to give them to her, so they seemed like even more of a tantalising dream than ever before. Never mind. There were plenty of children pouring into the Colony down below, she saw on her screen. Children who would be guaranteed employment as ambassadors when they left the Colony and reached adulthood. Quite the coup for their parents. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to secure their children's future with an opportunity like this?

Allie saw so much hope in the Colony. Perhaps Titans and Humans truly could achieve peace in a place like this. And if they could do it here, they could do it anywhere. What price wouldn't she pay for peace, above and beyond the one she'd paid already?

Allie wiped away a stray tear. There was no point crying over the past. She'd mourned long enough before the war ended. Now it was time to look to the future, and find out how Galen was going with his pipes.

"What's the ETA on Galen getting back to his apartment, Col?" Allie asked.

"Minus four minutes. He appears to be smug."

Allie rose. "Get a robot to clean up the crumbs, please, Col." She left the apartment, striding along the corridor back to where Galen waited. The man did look smug, but his smirk widened into a genuine grin when he spotted her.

"Looks like I beat you," he said cheerfully. "But my mother would never forgive me if I let a lady take me to dinner, especially on a first date. Shall we?" He waved open his door and gestured for her to go inside.

Allie couldn't help laughing. She hadn't heard gallantry like this in a very long time.

Galen's refrigerator turned out to contain very different rations to her limited kitchen. While she'd been given a week's worth of ration bars to sustain her until the shops and eateries opened in Metropolis, he had frozen meals that could be reheated into something that actually resembled Human food. His apartment didn't have a view of the stars, and it was a lot smaller than hers, but there was space for a sofa and a tiny retractable table with two chairs where they sat to eat their meal.

After two mouthfuls of her shrimp pasta, Allie heartily regretted requesting ration bars for the week. Galen's food actually tasted good. She might have to spend some of her credits in the restaurants after all. She hoped they opened soon. Maybe Galen would be willing to join her for dinner on occasion. The young engineer wasn't bad company at all.

CHAPTER 1

Galen couldn't remember ever talking so much in his life, yet Allie drank in every word while her honey-coloured eyes seemed to beg for more. Several times he had to tell himself he was imagining it. No woman had ever listened to him like this – not even his mother, and she'd loved him.

Still the words spilled out. He told her about how he was orphaned at fourteen, but because he was already an apprentice engineer he'd been allowed to continue his studies at the engineering college, finishing his degree at eighteen. How the other graduates all went to war and didn't come back, while he was given a job in the terraforming lab, working on prototypes and new techniques that he inevitably found ways to improve. Then, when the war ended, he'd signed up for the Colony, after discovering that a lot of his inventions were being put to use in the domes. So while he hadn't designed the place, he knew all the technology intimately.

Take their water supply, for instance. Unlike Styx, the water planet that relied mostly on desalination for its drinking water supply, where he'd first been apprenticed, New Hope had a ready-made water supply from the reservoirs beneath the surface, which is why they'd built the Colony on this very spot. Powerful freshwater springs bubbled up from the ground here, providing the entire population with more water than they'd ever need. Of course, they still recycled all their water within the Colony, to keep their pollutants from damaging the environment outside, but the treated wastewater was only used for irrigation, unlike on the colony ships, where they'd had to use it for everything.

At that point, Galen's mind caught up with his mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm boring you. What possessed me to talk about plumbing to possibly the most beautiful woman I've ever met..." He turned red.

Allie laughed softly and shook her head. "We've both spent half the day working on plumbing. Believe me, it's not boring at all, especially if it'll make my job easier. Now I know why they said you're a genius. You practically designed all the systems we use in the Colony. If I have trouble with anything, you know you're the first person I'll call."

"Any time," he replied eagerly. "And not just for work, either. Anything you need. Just call and I'll be there." He'd barely known the woman a day and here he was, offering to do anything for her. But it felt right, somehow.

"What about if I want someone to join me for dinner, so I don't have to eat alone?"

Warm, honey eyes drew him inexorably in. Galen swallowed. Oh, he wanted in, all right. "Especially then."

She dropped her gaze to the floor, as if what she saw in his eyes was too intense. "I'll remember. But on that note, I should probably go. I have no doubt half the Colony will have pressing maintenance issues tomorrow and we'll both need all the rest we can get. Thank you for a lovely evening, Galen. It's the best time I've had since...well, a while, anyway."

She rose swiftly and was out the door before Galen could move. So much for a good night kiss.

"Good night," he called as the door slid shut behind her.

He disposed of the remains of dinner, then leaned against the counter. Allie was right – it had been a lovely evening, one of the best he'd had in a while. He'd never hit it off so well with a woman before. What a time to find someone so wonderful, though. Couldn't fate have waited until he'd found and dealt with Halcyon before it rewarded him with an introduction to Allie?

His blood ran cold. What if Halcyon managed to attack the Colony before he found her...and Allie got hurt? He'd lost enough already. While she wasn't his yet, he still didn't want to lose the chance that one day she might be. He wouldn't give Halcyon the opportunity to hurt her. No, he'd strike first, however he could, Galen resolved.

Starting tomorrow, he'd hunt down the homicidal siren and end her. Then he'd be free to pursue happiness with Allie, knowing they'd be safe.

The siren's days were numbered.

CHAPTER 1

Allie had just dismissed her skimmer when she heard a woman calling her name. She turned to find Violet climbing out of an aircar, holding a bottle aloft in each hand.

"We finally got everyone into the Colony, so it's time to celebrate!" Violet announced.

Allie eyed the bottles. "What are those?"

"Finest fey moonshine. One of the Humans confiscated it from a kitsune who was trying to smuggle them in. I said I'd dispose of them properly, and so here I am!" Violet beamed. "Do you think we can drink them both tonight?"

"Not if I have to work in the morning," Allie replied, palming open her door and ushering Violet inside. "I've spent all day fixing plumbing in the Nyx Dome. The universe only knows what I'll have to deal with tomorrow."

Violet tossed her dark hair. "Well, a Human engineer, for starters. One who's afraid of Titans. He kept touching his implant, like it was some sort of magical amulet that could protect him from me." She snorted. "He might have been better off with an amulet. Those implants don't do anything except mark him as gullible. Maybe that was his name – Gill, Gull, something like that."

"Galen?" It couldn't be. He hadn't seemed afraid of her at all, and they'd spent most of the evening together. In fact, she'd thought he was working up the courage to kiss her right there at the end, which is why she'd made her excuses and left. She'd loved and lost once. Allie didn't think she could survive having her heart ripped out like that again.

"I think that was his name. Hard to remember. There were so many of them today. Young guy with a thing for music." Violet set the bottles on the bench. "Do you have any glasses?"

"Col, where are the glasses?" Allie asked.

A wall panel popped open.

"Thanks, Col."

Violet stared at Allie. "We have an AI controlling this facility? I don't remember that in the briefing documents."

"Of course. I'm probably not supposed to ask it to open cupboards and things, but who do you think responds when you ask for the temperature to be turned down in your apartment?" Allie asked, setting two glasses beside the bottle.

Violet peered around. "I use the controls. I don't talk to the walls. Is it...watching us?"

Allie laughed softly. "Col, are there cameras in the apartments?"

"There is no surveillance in private quarters," the AI said.

Allie shrugged. "Guess not, then. Why, were you thinking of doing something naughty you don't want anyone to see?"

Violet smiled. "Maybe. But Watch officers are supposed to be so good all the time, keeping the peace and all. Did they make you sit through an hour-long briefing on the importance of peace?"

She'd had to sit through months of peace talks as Humans and Titans gradually decided not to kill each other. Surely that was enough for anyone. Allie shook her head. "No, I must have missed that briefing. Fixing pipes today, or something."

Violet rolled her eyes. "Lucky you. Just thinking about it makes me need a drink." She uncorked a bottle and poured an inch of viscous purple liquid into each glass. "Is it supposed to look like that?" She lifted the glasses, eyeing the milky, mauve contents with suspicion.

Allie seized a glass. "I don't know. I've never been able to afford fey moonshine. To peace." She took a careful sip.

Violet gulped hers, then choked. "Stars, it's fey rocket fuel. That's potent!"

"Mm, it's strong, but I like it," Allie said, savouring her second sip. "I taste flowers, kisses and seafoam." And memories, she thought but didn't say.

"I think I just coughed up a lung," Violet said. "Is there any chance of some chocolate?"

Allie set her glass down. "Of course! How could I forget?" She retrieved a block from the refrigerator and passed it to Violet. "Have as much as you like. I think I'll finish my drink first."

"You can have all of it. Both bottles," Violet said darkly.

"Really? Then you should keep the block of chocolate. Fair trade." Allie reached for another block and unwrapped it. "We'll share this one."

They both ate in silence for a moment, savouring the sweetness of what Allie knew was the best chocolate in the system.

Then Violet started to laugh. "You know," she said, "I had you pegged as trying to seduce me down by the blast doors. I expected you to ask me for a favour, something I'm not supposed to give you. I figured if I brought you some liquor, maybe it would mellow you a little and you'd go easy on me. You're nothing like I expected."

Allie regarded her. "What did you expect?"

Violet's laughter died. "Colder. Harder. Not...chocolate." Fear darkened her eyes.

Allie hummed, hoping to set the succubus more at her ease. "I am here to pursue peace, Violet. I've had my fill of war. Now, why don't you tell me about your day downstairs? I'd love to hear your impressions of our new colonists."

Violet nodded and opened her mouth to recount the first of what would be many reports.

CHAPTER 1

"It has to be here," Galen said to himself as he palmed open the hatch to Maintenance Storeroom 6. If anyone asked, he was taking inventory of their spare parts and tools, but no one had. After all, he was the boss. Who would question him, as long as his Maintenance crews were out in the Colony, dealing with all the teething troubles that plagued such a high-tech new facility? No one, that's who.

He had plenty to show for his time in the previous five storerooms. All sorts of equipment that was supposed to be present simply wasn't, or the numbers were lower than expected. He'd called Allie, the most promising of his staff, to ask whether the missing equipment had already been used in repairs but not documented, and she'd laughed merrily.

"Boss, you're underestimating how lazy Maintenance staff are. Going to the storerooms and picking up our own equipment? Hardly. We message the AI, and have it sent. If there's an inventory issue, then it's Col forgetting things, or that equipment never arrived. Who's more likely to make a mistake – the AI, or the people who stocked this place?"

Galen had to admit he trusted the machine more than people, though he had to shake his head at Allie's name for the AI. Machines didn't need names. He'd thanked her and ended the call.

Sighing, he counted the pumps again. Four hundred and seventy-three, when there were only supposed to be four hundred and seventy-two. Skimping on supplies was one thing, but adding to them? Not likely. One of the pumps had to be his package.

But which one?

Galen scanned the shelves. They wouldn't have made it too obvious, but surely they'd left him some clue as to which one held more than just a standard-issue water pump.

There.

One of the boxes at the back bulged slightly at the top, as though someone hadn't closed it properly. Galen shifted the other boxes out the way until he could reach the suspicious one. The moment he lifted it up, he knew he had the right one. It weighed much more than the others.

He wanted to open it right away, but this was hardly the place for it. His office, or the workshop adjacent to it, would be the perfect place. After all, even if the surveillance cameras recorded everything, it wouldn't look suspicious for an engineer to be modifying or building equipment in the dedicated workshop designed for that purpose.

Reluctantly, Galen finished his stocktake before lugging the box back to his office. He was relieved to be able to drop his burden on his desk as soon as the door slid shut behind him. Whatever was in the box sure was heavy.

He flipped the lid open and found a sheaf of papers. Pages of schematics about the water supply pipework to the domes, as well as the design for a destructive device that matched those Halcyon was known to use.

It wasn't common knowledge, but the siren terrorist had detonated nuclear fission bombs at several of the sites where she'd left no survivors. It's how she'd destroyed the *Poseidon*, too, though the ship was too deep below the surface by the time the bomb went off for it to have done much damage.

It was both an insult and a promise to the Humans she loved to slaughter. Humans had destroyed their own world through nuclear weapons, she seemed to say, so she'd finish the job and drive their species to extinction with their own technology.

Galen swallowed. He didn't need to open the wooden box inside the cardboard one to know what it held. Fissile material. Some sort of radioisotope. Uranium, he imagined. Enough to build a nuclear weapon and destroy the entire Colony.

He'd known when he joined forces with the shadowy Humans First movement that they hated Titans with a passion Galen would never understand. Not just those who fought and killed like Halcyon, but all Titans. Some of their zealots believed the peace effort was merely a smokescreen while the Titans bided their time, waiting to strike and wipe out Humans for good.

So they'd given him the material to make a pre-emptive strike that would send peace up in a mushroom cloud of smoke, leaving New Hope to its native denizens.

Galen took a deep breath and opened the wooden box. Inside the lead-lined compartments he found four solid metal canisters, each containing a metal rod tarnished to a dull grey so they looked like cast iron or weathered steel. Ordinary metals, instead of stuff that could blow them all sky-high with the right detonator.

Galen was no terrorist. He hated Halcyon, sure, but that was personal. He had no intention of building a nuclear bomb. Instead, he'd build something that looked like one, but only put in half the uranium so there'd only be an ordinary explosion, with some radiation contamination. Not enough to kill anyone outside the immediate area, but enough to make it look like Halcyon had tried to sabotage the Colony.

The Watch would have to investigate, and Halcyon herself probably would, too, knowing she hadn't set the bomb. Either way, the siren would surface and Galen would get his chance.

He'd have to make sure the bomb was away from all the living quarters, and detonate it at night when the force screens were down, to make sure as few people were nearby as possible. He didn't want to hurt anyone. It had to look like an accident, going off prematurely with too little fuel. Galen was confident he could do that.

After all, Allie had called him a genius, hadn't she? Time to see if he could finally outsmart the siren.

CHAPTER 1

By the end of her first fortnight, Allie found herself humming all the time, she was so happy. Galen had assigned her the task of all the eating house fitouts in Metropolis and she couldn't wait until they were all open. While she finalised the plumbing in each premises, she got to see the menus and sometimes even sample the dishes they planned to offer their customers. By the time she'd finished her job in one restaurant or bar, the new owners had caught her contagious good mood, and after signing off on the job, they inevitably offered her a free meal once they opened.

Soon, she had enough invitations to keep her from cooking for the next month. And all the flavours...Human foods even more diverse than Titan ones, as if they'd compensated for all looking so similar to one another by varying their cooking styles as widely as they dared, while still ensuring the product was edible. Eateries that sold only ice cream or chocolate or coffee or tacos or sushi or crepes or...what in the world was a kebab? Allie wasn't certain, but she definitely intended to find out.

Maybe it was just her imagination, but there seemed to be more Human establishments than Titan ones. Or perhaps all the happy Humans were recommending her services to their friends, so she was kept too busy to visit more than the occasional Titan bar or two. Allie didn't mind. The more people she met, the more she learned about what had brought them to the Colony in the first place.

Some had come for the money, or the security it offered them and their children. Some came for the promise of peace, at least for a little while. But they spoke of peace as a dream, a temporary ideal that none of them thought would last.

Allie understood. If she hadn't lost her husband in the war, maybe her thoughts would be more focussed on mundane concerns.

"Are you finished already?" Melete, the muse who owned the exotic dance club, asked. "You'll have to come back when we open. I have dancers to appeal to everyone. When they hear you're the one who installed the showers that will be the envy of every dance club in Metropolis, they'll all be clamouring to thank you. Human, Titan, male, female, more than one...where ever your tastes lie, we can satisfy you, I'm sure."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind if I find myself lonely one evening. But you really don't owe me anything. I try to be as quick as I can. I have...many demands on my time," Allie said carefully. As if to illustrate her point, her comm sounded an alert. "Speak of the devil..."

Melete nodded respectfully and retreated deeper into the club.

At times like these, Allie appreciated the effect her reputation had on people. On Titans, anyway. She had yet to meet a Human who'd heard of her in relation to anything except her wizardry with plumbing.

Allie answered the call with a cheerful, "Hi, this is Allie."

"I thought you were still working, not spending time in a strip club." Ira, the Titan in charge of the Watch on New Hope, didn't sound impressed.

"You're just jealous your job doesn't let you spend much time here," Allie said lightly, not fooled by his tone. She'd known him for long enough to know he was nowhere near as stern as he seemed. "Plumbing is very important in the washrooms of a dance club. But the showers are all installed now, with lovely water pressure, if I do say so myself. So, what can I do for you? You got a leaky pipe in your office?"

"More like one that's blocked. You haven't reported for two weeks. Time to come in."

"Yes, sir. I'll get that pipe unblocked directly," Allie said, snapping off a salute.

"Not now. After dinner. Just make sure it's tonight." Ira ended the call abruptly. He was a busy man who didn't have time for goodbyes.

Maybe he should spend more time in strip clubs, or at least doing whatever he called fun, Allie mused, breathing in the scents of the eateries that were open for business. A particularly rich, salty smell caught her attention more than the others. Making a sound that came out very close to a moan, Allie caught herself, closed her mouth, and followed the smell to its source. A shop that sold something called pizza, apparently. More new Human food she hadn't tried.

Food worth sharing. On a whim, she called Galen.

After a few seconds, he answered, "Hello?" He sounded distracted.

"What are you doing for dinner?" she asked.

"I don't know. That's hours away," he said.

He must have been working as hard as she had today. "Nope. It's now. Tonight is pizza night, if you get your bossy butt down to Metropolis in the next ten minutes. Sending you my location." She sent her coordinates to Galen, then held her breath as she waited for his response.

"My bossy butt?"

"You're the boss, and you have a butt. Bossy butt. Don't you like pizza? It smells incredible." She breathed deeply. If he took more than ten minutes, she was going in without him.

"Pizza sounds great. I'll get down there as fast as I can. Bye."

She didn't have to wait long. Galen stepped off a skimmer, looking like he'd been hard at work in the workshop all day. Allie probably didn't look much better, but it wasn't like they were on a date or anything.

"You look beautiful," he breathed, his admiring eyes reinforcing the compliment.

Allie laughed. "You're just saying that because I had to deal with all the burst pipes today, while you got to stay in the office. One of the perks of being the boss, boss."

Galen just shook his head and raised his eyes to the sign above the pizza shop. "So this is where you want to eat?"

"Sure do." Allie led the way inside. The rich aroma intensified, reminding her that the ration bars she'd eaten for lunch were a long time gone.

"I smell why," Galen said, inhaling deeply. "I haven't had pizza since my mother..."

"Is she a good cook, your mother?" Allie asked. She didn't dare mention hers. Her own mother had never cooked a thing in her life.

"She was." Galen closed his eyes. "She died when I was fourteen."

A decade ago. Roughly the same time as Allie had lost her husband. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely.

Galen sighed. "Me, too. But not as sorry as the one who killed her will be. They told me she was a casualty of war, but I know better."

Allie's sympathy overflowed. "Your mother wasn't a soldier?"

Galen shook his head. "A scientist. I get my skills with machines from her. She encouraged me to tinker when I was a kid, letting me build things in her workshop. My father wanted me to be a doctor, but I wasn't interested

in how Human bodies work as much as machines. I think I disappointed him, but he died when I was a kid, too, so I'll never know what either of them think about what I've become."

"I'm sure they'd be proud of all you've achieved. You're very young to hold the position you do here in the Colony," Allie said. Her parents had made no secret of their disapproval for her choices, but then she'd never really been close to them.

"If there's some sort of afterlife for them, I hope they will be," Galen replied. He waved at the menu board. "What do you want for dinner?"

Allie chose one pizza, Galen chose another, and they both sat at a corner table to wait for their order.

"So what about you? Where did you grow up?" Galen asked.

Allie choked on her drink. If he didn't know, then she couldn't tell him. "We moved around a lot, so no one place really stands out. These five years on New Hope will probably be the longest I've ever lived in one place."

Galen nodded. "We moved around a lot, too, when I lived with my parents. Dad was the ship's doctor, and Mum was one of the technicians, so we went from ship to ship until they died."

Anxious to keep the conversation on his family and not hers, Allie ventured, "How did they die? You never did say."

"They were on the *Poseidon* when it was attacked. They didn't make it to the lifeboats in time." Galen plucked the straw out of his cup, threw it on the table and drank from the lip of his cup instead.

"Why weren't you with them?" Allie asked.

Galen laughed. "I was. I was in the cabin we shared, while they both worked the evening shift. When I heard the alarms, I headed for the lifeboats, but I was the only one. There were no other survivors."

The image of a sole lifeboat, floating alone in the waves, popped into Allie's head. Orphaned at fourteen and then alone at sea for so long before he was rescued. "It must have been terrible for you," she whispered.

Galen slammed his cup down on the table. "It's just part of war, or at least that's what everyone told me. The innocent suffer, while killers go free. That's why this war had to end, and this place has to succeed. No more killing."

Allie felt the peculiar urge to kiss him. "Absolutely. No more killing." She raised her drink in a toast that Galen seconded.

Their pizzas appeared, and Allie waited just long enough to watch Galen take his first bite before she tried to emulate him. It was messy and unfamiliar, but by the stars, it tasted so good she didn't care.

"Oh!" she mumbled around a slice. "We have to come back here."

Galen grinned. "Next week? I spotted a couple of places I'd like to try, too. One that sold yiros, which I haven't had in forever."

"Yiros?" Allie hadn't heard of that one.

"Ah, seasoned meat and sauce and salad, all wrapped up in flatbread? Some people call them kebabs," Galen explained, gesturing with his hands.

The mysterious kebabs. "Tomorrow, then, if they're open?" Allie suggested.

Galen swallowed. "A third date already, and a fourth next week? Careful, you'll have all the Maintenance guys talking. They'll think you like me."

Let them talk. People always did. Especially about her. "I do like you. I'll have dinner with you every night until we've tried every restaurant in Metropolis. And the other guys can talk until they lose their voices or find something more interesting to discuss."

Galen's eyes warmed. "I'd like that."

"What, them not talking about us? I'll see what I can do." Allie resolved to take care of that problem tomorrow. The Titans would be easy. The Humans might take a bit more effort. Only a little, though.

Galen shook his head. "Gossip can't be stopped. It's like radiation – once it's been released, there's no stopping it. That's why we left Earth."

"Sure there is. It just takes time and patience. Thousands of years, in some cases, like Earth. And there are ways to stop it. Radiation shielding, for one. Every problem has a solution. It just comes at a cost. Sometimes a higher cost than we can afford, or are willing to pay." Allie bit into a slice of pizza, forcing herself to concentrate on the flavour and nothing else. She already knew there was no price too high for peace, at least from her perspective. She'd given everything she had, and she'd give more still.

"Even peace," Galen said, like he was reading her mind. "Peace is worth any price."

More than ever, Allie wanted to kiss him. But she couldn't do any such thing. She had a meeting with Ira tonight, and she didn't want to start anything with Galen that she couldn't finish. Another night, perhaps.

CHAPTER 1

When dinner ended, Galen debated whether to ask Allie back to his apartment, or just kiss her goodnight and leave the invitation for another night. It was too soon, he decided, as she made no move to get close enough to him for a kiss. Instead, she waved as she stepped onto a skimmer to take her home.

Galen was tempted to step onto the hovering platform behind her, wrapping his arms around her body so they could go back to her place or his and get closer still.

He shook his head. Not until he knew she was safe. Safe from the clutches of the siren. Until then, he'd have to content himself with explicit dreams about her. And finish his project sooner.

Instead of taking his own skimmer home, he headed back to the workshop. If he finished it tonight, he could set the bomb in place before the end of the week, let it do its damage, and hunt the siren before next week's pizza date with Allie. He'd have to buy some alcohol to celebrate. Then, he'd tell her everything about his successful hunt for his parents' killer, so she could celebrate the victory with him. War would never be over for terrorists like Halcyon. The siren wasn't reasonable the way people like him and Allie were. The siren was a crazed killer who had to be stopped before she killed again.

And he was the man to do it, he was certain of it. What had Allie said tonight? What price was he willing to pay for peace?

"Almost anything, except her life," Galen swore. He wouldn't let the siren take anyone else he cared about. Never again.

CHAPTER 1

"So what do you have to report?" Ira's ice-blue eyes regarded Allie across the desk.

She knew he expected her to sit in the client's chair across from him, but she was feeling playful this evening, so she perched on the edge of the desk instead. "Aside from the expected complaints about shoddy work done by some of the other construction people that's caused me two weeks' worth of grief with no end in sight, nothing." Allie smiled. "Your Colony is so full of happy people it even makes me cheerful. I spend so much of my day singing as I go from apartment to apartment, or business to business, fixing things, upgrading things. You know. All the things a girl has to do to keep the water running around here."

"There have been six fights and five brawls today alone in the common areas of the Colony. That's not a sign of happy people."

Allie shrugged. "It could be. I've met men who were happiest when they were punching or hurting someone. And there are those who enjoy the pain. It takes all sorts to make a universe." She paused, puzzled. "What do you mean, six fights and five brawls? What's the difference? Aren't they the same thing?"

Ira tapped his tablet and held it out as video footage appeared on the screen. "In this fight, a pair of shifters attacked a Human." While Allie watched the brutal attack in horror, Ira continued, "A kitsune was badly beaten by what she says was a Human, but she wasn't sure. A Human and an incubus got into a punch-up over a succubus outside the strip club you invited me to this evening. In the Arbor Dome this afternoon, six Humans attacked a giant. Some shifters rushed to his aid, and then some more Humans, until some fifty people, both Human and Titan, were arrested and fined for brawling in public. We're not sure what started the other brawls – sometimes the surveillance cameras don't capture everything. All we do

know is the one place brawls don't happen is the Aqua Dome. And wherever you happen to be."

Allie wet her lips. "How many of your Watch have noticed that?"

"I'm pretty sure all of them noticed the Aqua Dome is peaceful. It might take them a lot longer to associate you with the unusual patches of peace, if all this unpeaceful activity keeps them busy."

Allie breathed out a sigh of relief. "I can't be everywhere at once. And I'm not doing much, honest. Just...calming things. Putting people in a good mood. There's nothing wrong with that."

"There are quite a few who'd argue that doing anything to control their thinking is wrong," Ira said.

"Only if they're aware of it," Allie argued. "They don't complain when they're being brainwashed by bigots, or warmongers, or advertising, or the smell of a new restaurant wafting down the street, enticing them inside. Having a humming plumber in their house is no different to any of those things!"

"They can reject ideas, or advertising, or even food, but they can't resist you," Ira said.

"Aww, that's so sweet of you to say. Does that mean you can't resist me, either?" Allie fluttered her eyelashes and slid off the desk. She laughed, knowing Ira was one of the few Titans she'd met who could. Maybe that's why she liked him so much. It couldn't be his sense of humour. "I'm not asking them to do anything outside their nature. I'm not controlling them. I'm simply...calming things. Bringing a little more peace into this place. Like we agreed we wanted."

"I want you to find the troublemakers. I know there are some in here. One of the most militant anti-peace movements, the Humans First group, boasted that the Colony wouldn't last six months before someone blew it up. They have sympathisers inside the Colony, I'm certain of it. Find them before anyone gets hurt. Your supervisor has connections to them. What about him?"

"My supervisor? You mean Galen?" Allie couldn't help laughing. "He's the last man I'd consider if I was looking for a terrorist. His passion for peace is only slightly less fervent than my own. There's absolutely no way he could be planning on blowing this place up. Next thing you know, you'll be trying to convince me that he's building a bomb."

Ira looked annoyed. "He could be. He has the technical knowledge and the tools to construct one."

Allie shrugged. "So do I, but you don't see me doing it." She held up her hands in surrender. "All right, all right. While I'm working to keep the water running, I'll keep an eye out for terrorists. And I'll ask Galen if he recognises anyone he used to know from the Humans First group. In between singing."

Before Ira could ask her to do anything else, she left, humming. Galen building a bomb. Honestly. Maybe Ira had a sense of humour after all.

CHAPTER 1

Galen finished taping the explosives to the inside the pump casing and breathed a sigh of relief. It was only half-full, even with the detonator in place – plenty of space for the radioactive payload, and yet still small enough to fit in his tool bag. If he wanted to destroy the city, all he had to do was put all the uranium rods into the casing beside the explosives and when the whole thing detonated...the city would be nothing but a radioactive crater. Not a single soul among those locked in the Colony would survive. It was a sobering thought.

If he'd known nuclear weapons could be so small, he wouldn't have been so surprised Humans had blown up their own planet with them. In fact, he was stunned that they'd lasted as long as they had. But he had to put this somewhere a siren would place it, not a Human, to make it look like it was Halcyon's work. That meant underwater. He knew just the spot, too – where the water supply bubbled up under the Aqua Dome from the springs deep below New Hope's surface. Without a set of Mer gills and a tail, he'd have to use a rebreather mask and fins, but he'd found plenty of those in Storeroom Five during his stocktake.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Galen pulled off his headphones. "What?"

"How's the new satellite doing?" Alpen asked.

Galen stared at the grey-skinned incubus. "It's not a satellite."

Alpen shrugged. "We've all been placing bets on what you're building. One of the other guys thinks it's some sort of anti-surveillance device, so we can have strippers in the workshop without the Watch knowing. Another one said it's a still for brewing alcohol. I figured it was a communications satellite so you could sell black market communications to the rest of the

system. Guess I was wrong. Unless you're lying so you can keep all the call fees for yourself. You'd be rich by the time you got out of here."

"It's not a satellite," Galen repeated, turning off his music player. "It's a water purifier. Some of the residents in the Aqua Dome have reported contaminants in the water, so I'll be putting this in the pipes below the dome to see if it can fix things, or at least remove enough contaminants to stop the complaints." That was the cover story he'd thought up and he was sticking to it.

"What sort of contaminants?" Alpen asked. "I remember one of the ships I was working on had this hideous stench to the water supply..."

"Don't know," Galen interrupted. "Can't detect anything out of the ordinary, but the Mer insist there's a problem. This is me trying to fix it." He waved his hand over the pump casing.

Alpen shrugged. "Good luck. Unless you need anything, I'm done for the day. Heading home for a meal. If the HVAC system has any hiccups you can't handle, comm me."

"It'll be fine. See you tomorrow." Galen watched him go, then donned his headphones and switched the music back on.

Allie had suggested they go to a fairy bar tonight, but she'd called to cancel an hour ago, saying she'd gotten caught up in a repair job over in one of the residential domes, so they'd have to reschedule for tomorrow instead.

Knowing he'd almost finished the bomb, Galen had decided to bring the schedule forward and put it in place tonight, so he could celebrate with Allie properly tomorrow. He'd decided not to detonate it for a few days. Maybe he'd even set it off tomorrow, while he was on that date with Allie. He'd have a solid alibi then. Not that he should need one, but you could never be too careful.

He'd originally planned to plant the bomb late at night, when no one was around, but he'd since realised that would look far too suspicious. Instead, he carried the modified pump in one box and the uranium rods inside his toolbox, looking for all the world like a plumber about to go replace a pump. Routine maintenance.

Sure enough, no one in the packed aircar gave him a second glance. They glared at his burdens as he squeezed in, before shuffling aside without a word. It was a long aircar ride to the base of the Aqua Dome, but by the time he reached it, Galen was the only passenger. Once again, he wondered how the Mer got around the Colony. Did they use water-filled aircars, or did

they stay in their aquatic habitat, avoiding the rest of the population? He hoped it was the second choice. Allie had pointed out different Titan races to him when they met for dinner in the evenings, and he now prided himself on being able to identify at least a dozen. She'd never pointed out a Mer, though, for which he was glad, because he wasn't sure he could hide his disgust at a species that killed so indiscriminately. Because Halcyon couldn't have been acting alone. She had to have had help, allies, maybe a whole Mer army to create the kind of body count she was responsible for. Galen still found it hard to believe that only one Mer had taken down a ship the size of the *Poseidon*. She must have had a team of them then, just like she'd have a team of them now. Someone to help her sneak onto the ship. Someone who knew its inner workings so she could blow it up. Someone who constructed the bomb for her in the first place, because he knew there was no way he could have built one underwater, and no siren could beat him when it came to Human technology.

Of course, he'd done everything alone, but he was Human, capable of walking around in the air and working in precisely the right place to make and plant whatever he needed to. No Mer could do what he could. Not to mention he'd have noticed the moment one entered his workshop. He wouldn't need Allie to point them out – he'd smell them coming.

Not that there would be any Mer in the maintenance corridors beneath their dome, Galen thought with considerable relief as he palmed open the door to the restricted area. Only authorised personnel had access. A terrorist like Halcyon would probably bribe her way in, or threaten someone into giving her illegal access. At least, that's what he'd say if anyone asked him how she'd gotten in.

The sound of gushing water echoed through the corridors as the hatch crunched shut behind him. If he closed his eyes, Galen could almost imagine himself at sea in a lifeboat again, wishing for rescue in whatever form it came. Then, he'd even hoped the siren he'd seen would help him. Thank the universe she'd ignored his pleas for help and swum away, if she'd even heard them. Galen wasn't sure he could have lived with himself, knowing he owed his life to Halcyon.

He shoved through the memories and strode into the bowels of the Colony. Tonight he'd lay his trap to catch a siren, and soon he'd spring it. His parents' shades could rest, knowing they'd been avenged.

After what felt like forever, he emerged into the main pumping station. The spring erupted in a fountain in the middle of the cavern-like space, filling the room almost to the level of the catwalk where Galen stood. A labyrinth of pipework ringed the room, drawing water from the spewing source and carrying it ever onward and upward to supply the Colony.

Galen knew exactly where he wanted to place his package. There was a spot where a dozen inlet pipes converged, and something as small as a new water purification unit...or a nuclear device masquerading as one...might go unnoticed.

He still had an hour before the lights dimmed and the Colony's night began, though, so it was possible that someone could walk in on him. Unlikely, but possible. Galen took the uranium rods out of his toolkit, and nearly dropped them, they were so hot. He managed to stash them out of sight under the steps, hoping they wouldn't melt the metal before he transferred them over to the bomb. He had to work quickly, then.

He stripped down and donned a wetsuit, then perched on the edge of the catwalk to wedge his feet into a pair of fins. Galen left his toolbox open on the edge of the catwalk, within reach of the water, and slid into the depths. He bobbed on the surface for a moment as he adjusted his rebreather mask, tapping it until the lights glowed into life, before he submerged completely.

Underwater was a completely different world. No wonder Mer seemed so alien to him – they didn't even breathe air, or so he'd been told. He'd never gotten close enough to see one's gills.

Galen swam carefully around the fountain, which sounded thunderous under the surface. Visibility was low with so much turbulence, but he knew if he kept to the walls, he'd be able to follow the pipes to the nest of inlets. The pump casing hindered him at first until it filled with water, and then it was just an extra weight to tow along until he reached the spot. Just like the schematics showed, there was a perfect little alcove between three pipes, just big enough to fit the pump casing, but shadowed by the pipes overhead so it wouldn't be immediately visible. Plus, when it blew, the bomb would damage at least ten pipes within the blast radius of the explosives alone. It was a shame to destroy such an ingenious water supply station, but his team would be the ones rebuilding, so they'd soon get it back in working order, secure in the knowledge that no terrorist would target it again.

Galen had planned to fasten the casing in place, but it fitted so snugly in its alcove that it wasn't necessary. Nothing but the blast itself or a seriously

strong water current would budge it. Now all he had to do was pop the payload in and he could be home before dark.

He kicked off the side of a pipe, but his fin caught on the join, so it was wrenched off his foot. Cursing, Galen reached for it, but in vain – his fin sank into the depths, deeper than he could go with just a rebreather. It didn't matter. There were plenty more where those had come from – dozens to spare in the equipment store at the end of the catwalk. He peeled off the other fin and set off in the direction of the steps.

It was harder going without his fins, especially now he was fighting the current, too. He felt the faint pull of the pipe inlets as he passed them, but that was actually a good thing, as it kept him away from the fountain. He made it halfway back before a particularly strong tug dragged him upward, into one of the pipes closer to the surface. Galen tried to fight it, but the current was too strong, pulling him along until his shoulders wedged into the pipe and he found himself stuck fast.

He fought to free himself, but the suction of a pump somewhere above him was stronger than any pressure he could exert, plus the water pouring into the pipe behind him, rushing to reach its destination, pushed him deeper in.

His rebreather only allowed him an hour of air. Past that, and he'd drown. He had to calm down and think. If he was wedged too tightly in the pipe to get himself out, he'd need help. He couldn't call anyone, so the next best thing was to trigger an emergency alert. The easiest way to do that was to block the pipe, and hope there was still someone up to answer the alert before his air ran out.

Galen spread out his arms and legs, trying to angle his body so no water could get past him. The current buffeted his back, trying to force its way through, but he held fast, fighting to block the flow for as long as his strength held out. His only hope was to trigger an alert.

After an eternity that was probably no more than fifteen minutes, Galen gave up. He hurt all over and the pressure was starting to make his head pound. Or maybe he was running out of air. He hoped it had been enough.

Something brushed his bare foot. Something warmer than the water. Galen twisted his head to try and see behind him. His headlight reflected off something orange, before he saw nothing but water. It couldn't be. He blinked, watching the pipe inlet again.

This time, he clearly saw a coppery tail fluke brush against his foot, before the rust-coloured Mer blocked off the end of the pipe.

Halcyon. It had to be. Galen tried desperately to squeeze inside the pipe so she wouldn't see him, but all he succeeding in doing was to bash his head so hard against it that he saw stars. Then the stars faded to blackness. Galen's last memory was terror at what the siren would do to him – a helpless Human caught in her world – before he lost consciousness altogether.

CHAPTER 1

"If we were Human, they'd have done something by now. It's because we're Titans that we're being ignored," Sven grumbled. "You're the only one who listens."

"I'm sure that's not true. I heard he's been testing the water all week, trying to find your mystery contaminants. There's nothing, Sven. I'll pull up the results myself, just to show you." Allie extracted her tablet, swiped at it a few times, then held it out to the frowning merman. "See? The springs supplying the Aqua Dome are some of the purest in the Colony. What kind of results are you getting in the aquaculture tanks? If there's a problem, it could be in the pipes, or the tanks themselves. There's so many things that can go wrong between the source and your fish."

"What do you take me for? No one knows water quality better than Mer. We can smell it. But our test results are just as mysterious as yours. They show nothing. But the fish...I've never seen anything like it. Nor have any of the others."

"Show me, then," Allie said. "If we can't find your problem in the water, maybe the answer lies with your fish."

She followed Sven along the raised catwalk between the pools, watching his muscles ripple and flex as he undulated along the surface. His tail was quite a striking shade of green, brighter than it really needed to be right now. Sven was showing off, she realised.

He dived under a section of catwalk and came up in the middle of a pool teeming with fish. Huge fish, bigger than anything they'd brought into the Colony. Nothing grew this fast in the space of a few weeks, unless...

"What do you think?" Sven waved at the school circling him. "They're fully mature and the flesh is just superb. We harvested a few when they reached minimum size, but this is more than we can eat. We could supply

the whole dome for a month from this pond alone. We'll have to, because at this rate of growth, they'll be sexually mature within a month and we'll be overrun."

"If you have that much to spare, send a few fillets my way. I can't remember the last time I had fresh tuna," Allie said, staring at the tank. It was a lie. The last time had been with her husband, before the war. He'd been working on accelerated growth as a recessive trait, so the population could build up rapidly before he'd released a spawning of fish without the acceleration gene. Within two generations, he'd had a sustainable population with a normal growth rate. "Where did you get these fish?"

"The fertilised embryos from Ceyx' lab," Sven admitted. "I know you don't like to hear his name, and I've heard stories about how you two met and fell in love. They've been embroidered into legends, to listen to the young mermaids sighing about you two like some sort of fairytale. But that was so long ago. Surely it's time to move on." He wiggled his tail suggestively.

Allie shook her head. "It's not that. He should be remembered. His work, as well as who he was. He'd have been thrilled to see his project doing so well. I only wish he'd lived to see it." She stared at the fish, avoiding Sven's eyes. "In the short term, I think you should deal with the oversupply by sharing it with the rest of the population. There's a vacancy for a seafood supply shop in Metropolis. I know a lot of the restaurant owners would love to have access to some of your fish. If you apply for premises tonight, I can slot you in for fitout tomorrow. You could be selling tuna fillets to Humans before the week's out."

"I'll look into it," Sven said. "But only if you promise to consider...there are other mermen here, eligible ones right here in the Colony. Not all of us supported the neutrality the Mer Council decreed. Some of us watched your victories with admiration. Any one of us would be both willing and capable of giving you children when you want them. You only have to ask."

To someone unfamiliar with Mer society, Sven's offer wouldn't sound the slightest bit romantic. But once you understood the nuances of Mer mating, where the females tended to rule while the males took care of children in between their other duties, it took on a whole new light. If she allowed a merman to give her a child, he'd dedicate himself to being her lover for as long as it took to conceive the child. After the birth, he'd care for it until it

reached adulthood, for two or perhaps even three decades. Sven was offering something akin to a Human marriage proposal.

And for all the love she'd shared with Ceyx, she'd never carried a child past the first trimester. He'd assured her it was neither his genes nor hers that were the problem, but a combination of the two. Allie had all but given up on children long before Ceyx died. Now...just thinking about it brought back memories of her many miscarriages. And threatened to break her heart anew. She refused to lose anyone else.

"Thanks, but no," Allie said abruptly. "You said you'd planned to start another tank of tuna. If you fill the pond now, I could better observe their progress, because I'd be here at the start."

"Yes, ma'am," Sven said. He swam up to the control board. "I'll fill pools twelve and thirteen. Twelve will have embryos from Ceyx' stock, while thirteen will use unmodified stock from the colony ship, so we can see the difference." He turned the valve, muscles rippling again.

Water fountained up in a pool to Allie's left. "You've got good water pressure here. I remember seeing something about the powerful flow rate in the springs, but I didn't think I'd be able to see the difference between this dome and the others. It must be because you're closer to the source." Within minutes, the pool was full, and the one beside it began to fill up. When it was perhaps a third full, the outlet started to sputter before the flow stopped altogether. "Ooh, that's not good."

Sven frowned. "It's never done that before." He leaped over the catwalk into the next series of pools to investigate. "It's still flowing, but it's down to a trickle," he reported.

"Maybe the pump died," Allie said, reaching for her tablet. "Col, show me all the error reports for the Aqua Dome water supply for the last six hours." There was only one – a blockage in the pipes, down near the supply source. "I better go down and fix it. I shouldn't take long."

"It'll be nightfall before you get there. Go home. Fix it tomorrow, and come back when you're ready. The embryos can wait another day. Get some rest."

Allie nodded and called for a skimmer, but she didn't tell it to go home. Instead, she directed it to the maintenance corridors beneath the dome, not even getting off the vehicle to palm open the door. She was soon whizzing down the corridors as the roar of the fountain drowned out all other sound.

Glad to let the skimmer steer itself, she tried to call Galen, to tell him about the blockage, but he didn't answer.

Maybe the man was finally getting some sleep, instead of working late like he usually did. She would, soon, too, just as soon as she'd fixed this.

Allie was surprised to find a toolbox and a set of Maintenance coveralls already in the pumping station, but the owner of them was nowhere in sight. Probably already fixing the problem, she reassured herself. She checked the toolbox lid, and her mouth fell open when she recognised it was Galen's. He was the boss; unblocking pipes wasn't his job. And the clothes were cool to the touch, like he'd been in the water a while. That wasn't good at all.

Fearing the worst, Allie stripped out of her coverall. If she was wrong, she'd head home to bed and leave the job to Galen. If she was right...oh, please, don't let her be right, she begged the universe. If she was right, Galen could be running out of air and stuck in a pipe. If he hadn't run out of air already...

Without hesitation, Allie dived into the water.

CHAPTER 1

"Hey, boss? Remind me to show you the pool tomorrow. There's a NO SWIMMING sign on the wall here for a reason."

Galen's head hurt and he was freezing. Oh, and his arms burned, from the shoulder right down to his elbows.

"Wasn't swimming," he managed to say. His brain raced, trying to work out how to explain this to Allie. He settled for, "There's a bomb in there. I tried to get to it, but..."

"Yeah, I found it," Allie said. "That's not all I found, either. Someone tried to blow up the Colony. You interrupted them, and it nearly cost you your life. If it weren't for you, we'd all be dead."

No. That wasn't right. Galen hadn't planted enough explosives to damage more than the space in this room. Halcyon must have done something. "How?" he asked.

Allie pointed at the uranium rods, nestled in some black fabric that looked suspiciously like his wetsuit. "There's enough plutonium there to blow this place twice over. The bomb was a distraction; nothing more. If even one of those rods hit the water, this whole Colony would be nothing but a crater. You must have scared the saboteur away before he could finish the job."

Not he. She. Galen sat up, then wished he hadn't, because the pounding in his head increased in intensity. He flopped back down. No wonder he was cold – he was lying naked on the catwalk. What must Allie think? The shrinkage alone... "Where's my clothes?" he mumbled.

"Your clothes are right where you left them, over there." Allie pointed. "Your wetsuit...well, it tore while I was trying to get you unstuck, so I helped things along a little until I managed to get the wetsuit off you altogether. I might have scraped off a bit of skin getting you out of the pipe, but I wasn't sure how much air you had. I figured you'd forgive me a few grazes as long as I got you out before you ran out of air."

She'd saved him. How, he didn't know, but right now, he didn't care. "Thank you." The heartfelt words just didn't seem like enough. He'd have to think of a way to thank her properly. She'd taken such a risk. If she'd come here while Halcyon was still here, Allie would have been killed like he almost had been. Numbly, Galen pulled on his pants, then his shirt. His hands shook as he struggled with the buttons, but he didn't dare ask Allie for help. She'd done so much already, and she'd nearly...she'd nearly...he'd nearly lost her.

Galen sank to his knees, breathing hard. He wasn't cut out for this sort of thing. He'd never killed anyone in his life. And to think that his attempt to catch the siren so he could keep Allie safe had almost killed her...it made him too dizzy to stand.

"I've dismantled the bomb," Allie said. "The explosives are relatively inert without the detonator. We should still take them back to the Watch as evidence, though. The plutonium is another matter. That's much too dangerous to leave here, but I'll need some sort of shielding for it. The wetsuit's just so I can touch it. That stuff is hot."

Galen pointed a shaking finger at the pump casing. "Take the explosives out of that and put the...what did you say it was?" Uranium. He'd been certain it was uranium. That's what nuclear bombs were made out of, back on Earth.

"Plutonium. The result of the decay of radioactive uranium. Powerful source of alpha radiation with a very long half-life, which is what makes it so dangerous. Especially in water." Allie dumped the explosives into Galen's tool box and bundled the wetsuit with its radioactive contents into the pump casing.

"How do you know that?" Galen asked.

Allie shrugged. "Experience. There was still a supply of plutonium batteries aboard the Human spaceship when they came to the system, and they've been used to power transportation modules. Especially those attempting to be stealthy and operate without engines. Submarines in particular. The easiest way to check if a battery was still good was to measure the temperature. If it was hot, great. If not, the nuclear fuel was spent and it was safe to dispose of."

"But....batteries. Not enough to make much of an explosion, right?" Galen couldn't take his gaze off the pump casing now he knew what it held.

"I already told you. There's more than twice what you'd need to blow this place up. Just one of those would be more than critical mass, under the right conditions, like the ones here. That's why we can't leave it here." Allie shoved the box of explosives into his arms. "Here, you take this and your toolkit. I'll take the payload. I've already called for an aircar that'll be waiting for us when we leave the maintenance corridor, but we'll have to take a skimmer from here. Unless you'd rather walk?"

Galen quailed under her searching gaze. He wasn't sure his legs would hold him. He'd built a nuclear bomb. A bomb big enough to take out the entire Colony and all its inhabitants. He shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought, but it was stuck firmly in his mind. He'd never killed anyone, but he'd nearly killed everyone. To take out one terrorist.

If he'd succeeded, he'd have been worse than Halcyon. Killed more people. Done more damage.

Numbly, he climbed up behind Allie on the skimmer, oblivious to his surroundings. When she took him to the Watch, he'd confess everything. Someone like him should be locked up, where he couldn't hurt anyone. Allie should never have rescued him. She should have left him to drown in the pipe like he deserved.

Genocidal maniac. Mass murderer. Terrorist of the worst kind. Not Halcyon. Him.

CHAPTER 1

By the time they reached the aircar, Galen had sunk into a deep state of shock. He didn't respond to a word Allie said and she had to half carry him into the aircar, where he curled up on the floor in the corner with his back to the wall, looking like a stricken elf who'd drunk so much moonshine he couldn't tell the difference between his own hallucinations and reality.

The man could do with a shot of moonshine, Allie decided, as she loaded their gear into the aircar.

Her first thought was to take Galen to his apartment where he could sleep off his shock, while she reported to Ira with the dismantled nuclear weapon, but the man was a wreck. He shouldn't be left alone in his current state. Especially not if the person who'd planted the bomb recognised him and came after him at his apartment.

No, Allie decided, she'd take Galen to her place instead. There was space for two, so she could stay with him, and she was more than a match for any Human who managed to follow them to her apartment. Any Titan, too, but most Titans knew that, so they wouldn't try something that stupid. Besides, the bomb had all the hallmarks of Human technology, not Titan, especially the plutonium payload. The canisters that held the radioactive material were battery casings, for goodness' sake.

She had to tell Ira, but she needed Galen to tell him what he knew, too. And right now, the man wasn't coherent. Ira could wait until tomorrow. As long as she kept the evidence close where no one else could touch it, it would keep until morning. Galen needed her now.

She left the box and the pump casing just inside the doorway of her apartment before returning to the aircar for Galen and his things. He moved like an automaton, or someone who'd been subject to Titan mind control. Surely that wasn't possible, though. A Titan and a human teaming up...it was unheard of. Not to mention no Titan would be stupid enough to blow up the dome where Mer lived. Unless one of the Mer was involved...but few

Mer knew Human technology the way she did. If the Mer had managed to get control over Galen, though...

Once he'd shuffled into her apartment and taken a seat on her couch, Allie asked, "Galen, was there a siren in the tunnels with you today? Did she give you orders?"

Even as the words left her lips, Allie didn't believe them. For all Sven's talk of support, mermen lacked the voice range to use a song to control anyone, Human or Titan. And no mermaid would dabble with explosives. None of this made sense.

"I saw her," Galen said grimly. "Because of me, she could have blown us all up. You shouldn't have saved me. Should have left me to drown."

Now Galen wasn't making any sense.

Allie narrowed her eyes, and really looked at him. He was still shaking, and his clothes stuck to him like he'd still been wet when he put them on, or the clothes had been damp from the fountain spray, or he'd broken out in a cold sweat since dressing. She laid a hand on his arm, and was surprised to find his skin colder than hers. No wonder he was shivering. She'd put her money on the man simply being in shock, nothing more.

She knew how to handle shock. "Let's get you out of those clothes and into bed," she said.

Any normal man's eyes would light up at that invitation. Even Galen's, on any normal night. Tonight, his gaze remained unfocussed and dull. It broke her heart.

"Here." She pulled him to his feet, not bothering to hide her greater-than-Human strength from him. He wouldn't notice. Allie made short work of his shirt buttons, shucking off his shirt more gently than she might have if this encounter had been motivated more by passion than pity. One day, when he was more himself, she would rip his clothes off and have her way with him, she decided. For a man who spent most of his day in a workshop, he sure had some muscle to show for it. Maybe it was moving all those heavy things around, or maybe he spent all his recreational time in the gym. She ran her hands down his chest, telling herself she was checking his core body temperature, while also satisfying her curiosity about the firmness of him.

"Ohh, Allie," he moaned. It was all the warning she got before he grabbed her and kissed her.

Slow and sensual, he made her breath catch in her throat with a kiss that was everything she could have hoped or asked for. If she'd known Galen

could kiss like this, she'd have demanded a demonstration on the night they met, instead of running from it.

He broke the kiss, because she didn't want to. "My turn," he said.

"Your turn?"

He nodded. "You undressed me, so I should undress you."

Nudity had never bothered her before, but this was different somehow. This was a man who'd never seen her naked before. And who wanted to do more than just look at her naked body, she was certain. Allie swallowed. "It's been a long time since anyone but my husband has touched me like that," she said. Ten years. Ten long, lonely years. More than enough mourning.

Galen stepped away from her and bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go so fast. If you're not ready for this...if the wounds are still too raw..."

Sweet man. Misguided, but still sweet. Allie shook her head. "Oh, I'm ready. I want this. I think even Ceyx would wish me happiness, if he could. I'm just...rusty, is all."

Galen grinned. "Now, that's where you got lucky. Working in Maintenance, I know just how to get rid of all the rust, and rub you up until you feel all shiny and new."

Allie laughed. "Been practicing that line, have you? Is that the first time you've used it?"

"I've rehearsed it so many times in my head, what I'd say and what I'd do if you ever gave me the chance to make love to you," Galen admitted. "I'm still not certain if this is a fantasy or if it's real."

"It's real," Allie promised him. "But I'm all for a bit of erotic fantasy."

Now their clothes couldn't come off fast enough. Allie pulled Galen toward the bed, luring him with kisses as the logical part of her mind reminded her that she had to keep him warm. They'd barely touched the sheets before he was inside her, filling her to the hilt with all the wonderful sensations she'd missed, and a few new ones that she suspected were unique to Galen.

Ceyx had known her all her life, but he'd never given her pleasure the way Galen did now. So much for the Mer being legendary lovers – she could feel the evidence of Human superiority with every powerful thrust into her depths. They fit together so perfectly it was hard to believe they were two

separate bodies and not one, so attuned to one another that at the peak of her pleasure, her cries of joy echoed his.

When they were thoroughly sated, she lay in his arms, staring at the Milky Way stretching across her skylight. Her body felt akin to the sky, for in one night Galen had ripped away her loneliness and filled her with so much more than she'd ever expected that it felt like she, too, was made of a million stars. She could hear her own heartbeat, the thrumming rhythm nothing but the tempo behind the song humming through her blood.

A siren song indeed. One she had no intention of resisting.

CHAPTER 1

Galen awoke bathed in starlight, lying a bed where he held a beautiful naked woman in his arms. If he'd died and there was indeed an afterlife, he wasn't sure he deserved one this perfect.

Allie's eyes blinked open. "Oh, good, you're awake. It seemed rude to jump you while you were still asleep." Before Galen could say a word, she threw a leg over his hips and guided him inside her. "Stars, that feels so good," she moaned, grinding against him.

Entranced, Galen let her take charge, content to watch pure pleasure lighting up her face. He'd never met a woman so wild and free and joyful. And he wanted her to stay that way. Free of pain and suffering and fear. He'd do anything to protect her. Anything to make her happy. He held on as long as he could, wishing she could dance on top of him like this forever, but she was too caring a lover to pay attention to only her own pleasure. She soon had him gasping her name, meeting every rock of her hips with a thrust of his own, until he swore by the stars that he'd never felt anything as good, either.

He thought the fun would be over for a little while, as they both had to work today, but when Allie pulled him into the shower to help her clean up, as she put it, he soon forgot about anything except the flow of water, the slide of wet skin on skin and the way she turned his world upside down when she brought her wicked mouth into the mix.

Much later, when he reluctantly dressed, Galen's plan was clear in his mind once more. Yesterday he'd made a mistake, one which had almost resulted in tragic consequences, but that very fact made it even more important that he blame the whole mess on Halcyon. The Watch could hunt her down, catch her and imprison her somewhere where she couldn't hurt anyone ever again. Once she was caught, Allie would be safe, and he could spend the rest of his life making her happy.

Maybe she'd even let him move into her apartment here. It was definitely the bigger of the two, and he wondered how she'd managed to qualify for such a nice place, with a window, no less, when she was just a Maintenance worker and he was her boss, but he didn't have this kind of luxury.

Allie flashed him a joyful smile then, filling his thoughts with visions of her from last night and this morning. He had no space for silly suspicions. He was utterly, irretrievably in love with her, and he didn't care about anything else.

CHAPTER 1

Allie sent Ira a short message, telling him she'd meet him in his office at eight in the morning, and she'd bring a witness to the attempted sabotage she'd found.

Galen was too busy hunting through her refrigerator for breakfast to notice. "Where's all the food?" he asked. "There's nothing in here but ration bars and a tiny block of chocolate."

"Chocolate?" Allie immediately perked up. She was certain she'd eaten the last of it a week ago, and she had yet to find a chocolate shop in the Colony that could satisfy her craving for the Human confection.

"Chocolate is not a breakfast food," Galen said. With a frown, he added, "And nor are ration bars, unless you're starving and there's nothing else."

Allie wisely decided not to tell him that she'd eaten nothing else for most of her time in the Colony. Cooking was not her forte, and while the Mer had promised her a shipment of fresh fish, it hadn't arrived yet. The only meals she'd eaten that weren't survival rations were the ones she'd shared with Galen.

"Maybe we can pick something up from one of the tea or coffee houses on our way to meet with the Watch. I'm sure some of them serve breakfast," she said.

"The Watch?" Galen looked nervous.

Allie was perfectly calm. "Of course. We need to get this evidence into the right hands, where it will be safe. I don't want to keep explosives or nuclear fuel in my apartment. That sort of thing is dangerous."

She summoned an aircar and they were soon zipping through the corridors of the Colony to Ira's office.

"I thought we were going to the Watch," Galen said. "Isn't this...?"

"Metropolis Central, where the master controls for the entire Colony are, and the head of the Watch lives?" Allie smiled. "Indeed it is. For something this serious, I figured we'd go straight to the top."

Galen looked like he wanted to argue, so Allie pushed the bundle of bomb parts into his arms and marched him to the door of Ira's apartment. She was five minutes early, but she had yet to see him in any other state than fully dressed and ready for work. Allie knocked briskly on the door, opened it, and led the way in to Ira's home office.

She dumped the wadded-up wetsuit on Ira's desk and gestured for Galen to do the same with his burden.

"What's this?" Ira asked, poking the wetsuit. Heat from the plutonium had melted it together in places so the canisters were almost completely concealed.

"The makings of a nuclear bomb. In fact, when we found it late last night, it was almost operational. There's enough plutonium in there to destroy the Colony twice over." Allie swallowed as her eyes met Ira's ice-blue ones. "You were right. There are people who would destroy the fragile peace we've created here."

"Plutonium? Only Humans use that, though quite rarely now, as most of it is spent. In fact, the only remaining stocks we're aware of are in the hands of the Humans First terrorists." Ira flicked a glance at Galen.

Allie didn't miss the way Galen stiffened, either.

"It's not only Humans who use it," Galen said. "The siren Halcyon has set off radioactive devices on at least four occasions, starting with the sinking of the *Poseidon*."

Allie stared at him, not sure what to say to that.

Ira was not similarly constrained. "That's not common knowledge. Where did you hear that?"

"I was there. Only one person survived the *Poseidon*: me. I managed to get away in a lifeboat before the siren sank her, and when the ship blew up, I was far enough away that all I had to contend with were the waves. I didn't know the explosion was nuclear until the investigation team told me later when they tested my blood for radiation poisoning. I'd asked them to retrieve my parents' bodies when they refloated the ship. The poor guy had to explain to me that there weren't any bodies, as there was barely any ship left to salvage."

Ira and Allie exchanged a glance, but said nothing.

Galen continued, "If you know about the *Poseidon*, then you know she killed plenty of others during the war. She targeted Human ships, destroying them all in the same way. More people escaped from the later ones, though, so there were plenty of witnesses. And now she's here, trying to destroy the Colony."

"Why do you believe that?" Ira asked.

"It represents peace between Titans and Humans – something she's dead set against. I'm surprised she didn't try to attack the peace talks, but maybe those were too well guarded, so she decided to target this place instead. At first, I thought it was only a rumour that she was in the Colony, but last night confirmed it. I know she's here because I saw her. I'd remember that rusty tail anywhere. She trapped me underwater and if it wasn't for Allie here, I'd be dead," Galen said.

Allie swallowed, trying to moisten her dry mouth. "She was present throughout the peace talks. Halcyon was the Titans' chosen mediator. If she hadn't been there, none of the Titan delegation would have attended. There would be no peace, and the Colony wouldn't exist. Since that time, she's been one of the strongest Titan voices for peace."

Galen snorted. "That's complete stardust. She blew up at least six buildings on Elysium after the peace treaty was signed. All places where both Humans and Titans worked in the same building. She's so pissed off the war ended that she's taken to killing her own people now, too."

"All the attacks on Elysium have been traced back to Humans First activists," Ira said. "There is no mention of Halcyon or in fact any Titan in the official reports. All of the suicide bombers on those occasions were Human."

Galen paled, but his expression grew stony. "I know what I heard, and I know what I saw last night. She was there. Find her, and interrogate her. See what she has to say for herself."

Ira steepled his fingers together. "Perhaps we will. In the meantime, can you recount the events of last night, please?" He set his tablet on the desk, tapping the screen so that it would record Galen's testimony.

Ira listened for a long time, just nodding his head, before Galen ran out of breath. Then Ira had a few questions, just asking him to clarify things he'd said, before he dismissed Galen.

Allie rose to leave, too, but Ira held up his hand. "Stay. I need to speak to you, too," Ira said.

Galen looked torn, like he wanted to stay with Allie but he really, really wanted to get away from Ira. "I'll get you some breakfast, and a coffee, okay? I'll wait for you," he said finally, backing out of the room.

Allie waited until the door had closed behind Galen and his footsteps had faded away. She took a deep breath. "No, he doesn't know. No Human does."

Ira turned his x-ray stare on Allie. "Did you do it?"

"Like you need to ask. The bomb's been made by an amateur, not a professional. Someone who's never made one before, or trying to make it look that way. If it weren't for the plutonium, and the location, I wouldn't have bothered you. And for the record, all four of those ships blew because of poor Human engineering. All I did was sink them. Water, the pressure, and poor storage practices for the nuclear submarine batteries did the rest." Allie waved at the display on the desk. "If this had been my work, the Colony would be dust right now, and we wouldn't be standing here."

Ira nodded. He knew her well enough to know she wouldn't bother blowing stardust up his butt. "Is it possible that another Mer...?"

"No. No one else would dare. They wouldn't defy the Council, and any who would...well, then there's me." Allie thought of Galen's strange behaviour last night. Shock or mind control? She still wasn't sure.

Ira read the doubt in her expression as if he'd read her mind. Perhaps he could. Allie still wasn't certain which Titan race he belonged to, but she had nothing to hide from him. However, if he rummaged too far into her head, he'd stumble across her memories of her bed play with Galen. She almost wanted him to find them, so she could see his expression when he did.

"I want you to speak to the Mer. Make certain it wasn't them. I'll assign some Watch officers to the investigation, and let you know what I find in the surveillance footage." He eyed the mess on his desk. "I take it it's too much to ask for you to take this with you?"

Allie shook her head. "I think you need to keep it safe. The plutonium alone...and what if there's more? I'll ask Col to search the Colony. It might help us find the culprit, but it'll definitely make this place safer." She raised her voice to issue an order to the AI.

It was Ira's turn to shake his head. "You know you're the only person in the entire Colony who talks to the AI, don't you?"

Allie shrugged. "It's intelligent and it obeys orders. Much like any Human or Titan under the control of a siren song. Force of habit, I guess." She rose.

"Are we done? If I know Galen, he'll have found something lovely for breakfast and it'll be getting cold. If the Watch find anything useful on the surveillance footage, let Violet know. She'll inform me."

"You're subverting my staff now?"

"Not yet. I don't need to. We're working toward the same goal. I understand you're too busy to keep me informed about everything, so I took the initiative." Allie winked. "In case you're interested, her weakness is chocolate, and I'm sure she'd appreciate some for a job well done. So would I, if you find a good supplier in the Colony. I've run out." She turned and strode out of the office, leaving Ira grumbling under his breath. Allie hid her smile. It was shaping up to be another beautiful day.

CHAPTER 1

Galen made it back to the entrance to the Watch building just as Allie stepped outside. Her beaming smile as she spotted him warmed his heart. He had done the right thing up in Ira's office, he told himself. Protecting her was worth any price.

"I brought you a muffin," he said, holding up the bag. Actually, he'd bought half a dozen, but he'd eaten a couple along the way to quiet his roaring belly.

Any other girl would have asked what kind, or reached for the bag to find out. Allie reached for his hand instead and said, "Let's go somewhere a little more private for breakfast. How about the park in the middle of the Arbor Dome?"

Galen was only too happy to agree. Within moments, they mounted a skimmer and the acceleration as it took off pressed her sweet body against his, making his breath catch in his throat. After last night, he never wanted to be separated from her again.

Allie let the skimmer carry them deep between the trees before she leaped to the ground. Galen followed more slowly, trying not to spill the coffee. The skimmer zipped off and out of sight, leaving them alone in the forest.

Allie let out a blissful sigh. "Much more peaceful than Metropolis. Let's sit here." She pointed at a bench, artfully placed on the edge of a clearing filled mostly with a pool of crystal-clear water. It looked like something out of an old Earth painting. It probably was, Galen realised, seeing as someone had created this, just like everything else in the Colony.

They both sat. He passed Allie her coffee before he ripped open the bag containing their breakfast.

Allie clapped her hands. "Oh, you're an absolute sweetheart, Galen. Chocolate muffins. I think I'm in love." The kiss she gave him in return

confirmed it.

A crazy idea popped into his head. One he couldn't seem to dismiss. He barely knew her and they'd kissed for the first time barely a day ago, but he already knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. And life could be so short, with war and terrorists and who knew what else around the corner. That's why he had to ask her. Had to...

Galen opened his mouth to give voice to his heart's most ardent proposal.

"Galen, I need to tell you something. Something I should have told you before," Allie began.

Galen closed his mouth and signalled for her to continue.

"While you were telling Ira about last night, I realised that – "

A raucous bark of laughter interrupted her, followed by several others.

"Ooh, lovebirds in the forest."

"A pair of Humans."

"Don't they know it's dangerous in the woods?"

Four men emerged from the shadows, all of them barefoot. They prowled forward, more like animals than men.

"Shifters," Allie said softly. "Hunters of some sort. I'd say wolves, but I don't think so. More likely some sort of cat."

"Get in the water, then," Galen said urgently, rising to his feet. "Cats don't like water. I'll fend them off while you call for help."

"Tigers like water just fine," one of the men growled, stepping forward. "And it'll only take one of us to hold you down so you can watch how the rest of us entertain your little girlfriend. This is our territory, and you're trespassing, Human. Your kind need to be taught a lesson."

Allie burst out laughing. "A bit too melodramatic before breakfast, don't you think, boys? This is public land, free to be enjoyed by all Colony residents. At least, those who have the social skills to stay." She lifted her coffee from the seat beside her and sipped it before she started to hum a cheerful song Galen didn't recognise.

"Leave her alone," Galen said through gritted teeth, squaring up for a fight. He'd learned in the college dorms that his age and size made him a target, so he'd made it his mission to learn how to defend himself. Four Human opponents was the most he'd ever had to deal with, and even then he'd come out with a couple of broken ribs and a black eye, but it had been worth it. He hoped Titans weren't harder to fight than teenage boys high on

hormones and adrenaline. If only his brain didn't feel so fuzzy. Should have had more sleep last night. "Run, Allie," he pleaded.

Allie stopped humming. "Hi, I'm Allie, and this is my friend, Galen." She gave a little wave. Galen caught a glimpse of something orange like a flame between her fingers before it disappeared. He must have imagined it. "We're responsible for your water supply in the Colony. When there's trouble, I come along to your house and sort things out. I'm very good at what I do, right, Galen?" He found himself nodding. Allie continued, "I enjoy my work, too. I like to sing while I'm working. I find it makes everything better."

The shifters met Allie's spiel with silence. It jarred with the voice in Galen's head telling him to run or fight, but that voice seemed to grow fainter even as he tried to focus on it.

The man at the very back gave a little salute. "You enjoy your breakfast, ma'am." He and his fellows melted away into the trees.

Galen shook his head, trying to fight the fog that filled it. "Allie? What just happened?" None of it made sense.

Allie's hand grasped his arm and pulled him to sit beside her again. "Just making friends with the neighbours," she said. She reached for a muffin and bit into it. "Mm, this is wonderful. You're going to have to tell me where you got them."

Galen sighed and grabbed a muffin. The moment was gone, stolen by a bunch of shifters. He couldn't ask her now, or the memory of his proposal would be forever tainted. Another time. At dinner, perhaps. When he wasn't feeling so foggy.

At his side, Allie began to hum softly again, and the world was wonderful once more.

CHAPTER 1

Allie was making her final adjustments on the fitout for Seafood Supply, Sven's new fish shop, when she received an incoming message. Violet wanted to meet her for lunch at a café on the other side of Metropolis. Allie fired off a quick affirmative before she started to pack her tools.

"Are you finished already?" Sven echoed the response of almost every satisfied customer Allie had dealt with.

"I used to fix Ceyx' fish tanks on the ship. I could have done these ones in my sleep," she said.

"When do you want your fish? I can grab them from the cool room now, if you like. You forgot them last night."

Was it only last night that Sven had flirted with her and promised her fresh fish? It felt like so much longer.

"How about I swing by after work this evening, if that's all right? At the Aqua Dome, not here. I want to ask you something," Allie said.

A slow smile spread across Sven's face and he winked. "Whatever my lady wishes."

Allie almost corrected his mistaken assumption, but decided it didn't matter. Maybe she should bring Galen along tonight, just to stir things up a little. And if a siren truly had been messing with Galen's head, perhaps she'd give herself away with some spark of surprise – or Galen might recognise her.

She waved goodbye to Sven and took a skimmer to see Violet.

The moment Allie stepped off the skimmer, she had to take a deep breath. The most exquisite sweetness, wrapping a core of earthy bitterness assailed her nose. Chocolate. Fresh and hot and...

Violet waved to get Allie's attention. "I found you a chocolate shop. What do you think?"

It wasn't just a shop. It was a café whose menu consisted solely of cocoa-based products. It truly was a wonderful day, Allie said to herself as she followed Violet inside.

"We'll have two orders of the chocolate chili and...what would you like to drink?" Violet said, turning to Allie. "I hope you don't mind me ordering, but I heard from a dragon that their chocolate chili is the best he's ever tasted. One of the Watch fire mages swears by it, too."

Allie smiled. "Whatever you recommend. I'm still growing accustomed to Human food, and I like to try everything at least once."

Violet finished ordering for them and led the way to a secluded corner table. As she settled in her chair, she asked, "What do your kind normally eat? I mean, you all kept to yourselves so much on the ship. I never saw any of you in the messhall. I never really thought..."

Allie waited for the waiter to fill their water glasses, then drank deeply to give the Human waiter time to get out of earshot before she answered, "Fresh fish, when we can get it. Lately, it's been a mix of ration bars and a selection from eating houses as they open. The other Mer finally have the aquaculture farm up and running, so they'll be selling fresh seafood tomorrow, I believe. I'll get my order in advance, of course."

"Of course." Violet nodded. "How do you cook it? I mean, on land, you'd use a normal kitchen like the rest of us, but in the water..."

"We don't. Cooking removes many essential nutrients and destroys the fresh texture. I believe Humans do something similar, though they call it sashimi."

Violet looked horrified. "Raw fish? Remind me not to date a Mer. Present company excepted, of course."

Allie inclined her head, accepting the oblique apology. "Do you have any information for me?"

Violet nodded and pulled out her tablet. "My boss asked me to investigate the surveillance footage for a particular maintenance tunnel. It was all rather urgent, and he pulled me off another investigation so I could do this today. All I heard was that someone had planted a bomb, and they wanted to know who had the opportunity. I combed every surveillance camera for that corridor, the maintenance tunnels, everything. And all I found was two people. You, and this guy." She tapped the screen, then tilted it so Allie could see. "He looks familiar. I'm sure I know him from somewhere."

Allie watched Galen struggle with his toolbox and what looked like a residential water pump as he palmed the door open and disappeared inside. Her heart sank as she recognised the pump as identical to the casing that had housed the bomb. It couldn't be Galen. Or if it was, he had to be under someone else's control. He wasn't a killer. There was just no way he'd blow up the Colony. It was a suicide mission, and he was smart enough to know that. The Galen she knew didn't have a death wish.

Someone had definitely mind controlled him, she decided. That was the only explanation. And when she found out who...she'd tear the siren's tits off.

CHAPTER 1

Fear curdled in Galen's belly as he approached the Aqua Dome. Now he was so close to his decade-long goal, he was terrified. It didn't help that Halcyon had starred in all his nightmares since the ship sank. She'd ripped away everyone he loved, and he couldn't let it happen again. His arms tightened around Allie's waist as the skimmer raced through the corridors to the Mer habitat.

"They prefer communal living to individual apartments," Allie said over her shoulder. "So their habitat is different to most. They manage the aquaculture facility that supplies the whole Colony with seafood, or it will when their fish stocks reach harvestable size. It's early days yet. At the moment, all they're producing stays within the Mer habitat. They only eat the freshest seafood."

Galen couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Fish who eat fish? Isn't that cannibalism?"

Allie laughed. "Back on Earth, the bigger fish ate the little fish because that's all they had. It's not cannibalism when they're different species, and it's the same with Mer. Mer have more in common with Humans than with fish. They're marine mammals, after all. Didn't Earth have marine mammals? Dolphins, and something bigger, too?"

"I've seen pictures of dolphins. They weren't much bigger than a Human, but they spent their whole lives in the ocean. There are tales of even bigger things – whales, my mother called them – that were the size of a ship, but I find that hard to believe. How could something so huge survive? What would it eat?"

"Whales sound intriguing. I hope there's DNA stored in the databanks somewhere, so one day scientists can create them again and they'll swim in Altan seas," Allie said dreamily.

Galen suppressed a snort. Here he was, terrified of coming face to face with the woman who'd killed his parents, yet knowing he owed it to his parents to seek revenge if he could. All the while, Allie was talking about monsters even more frightening than the murderous Mer, and how much she wanted to meet them. If she met Halcyon, she'd probably want to shake hands with the woman, or whatever Mers did. It was as though Allie had been born without a sense of fear.

Dangerous. No wonder he wanted to protect her so much. She did so little to protect herself. Wanting to meet monsters indeed.

"We're here." One moment she was in his arms, the next she bounced down off the skimmer, holding out a hand as if to help him down. "C'mon. What are you afraid of?"

"Halcyon," he blurted out.

Sympathy filled her eyes, or perhaps it was pity. "Mers are pacifists, and the ones here more so than most. You have nothing to fear from them, I promise. Halcyon is...unusual, even for a Mer. When she joined the war effort, it wasn't popular. She...let's just say you probably shouldn't mention that name around the Mer you meet today."

Galen nodded, wondering for the umpteenth time how she knew so much about Titans and the war. Perhaps she'd studied politics or modern history while he learned engineering, then switched to plumbing because all the political jobs were taken.

"Why did you become a plumber?" he asked.

Allie stared at him for a moment before she answered, "To get into the Colony, of course. I signed up as an apprentice in the construction phase, and volunteered as one of the Colony residents the moment they opened for applications. I knew this was where I needed to be, and here I am. Queen of the pipes." She laughed.

Did that then make him the king? If it meant a lifetime with her, he'd take the job in a heartbeat. This was hardly the time or the place to say so, though.

They entered a farming zone, which was made up of ponds as far as the eye could see, with narrow jetties between them.

"It's nearly dinnertime, so most of the Mer will be fishing. This is the best place to meet everyone. If you see anyone you recognise, let me know," Allie said.

Galen nodded, scanning the ponds for signs of life. What he'd taken for still pools were actually teeming with fish, and a surprising number of brightly-coloured Mer. Blue and green, gold and silver, black and white...so many shades, but not a hint of orange among them. Slowly it dawned on him that Halcyon wasn't here. But if she wasn't...where was she? It wasn't like she had anywhere else to go. The only water habitat in the whole Colony was here.

"Is everyone here?" Galen asked Allie.

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'll ask Sven." She waved at a group of men entering the farming zone. One of the men finished pulling off his shirt and waved back.

The whole group headed in their direction, led by a shirtless dude showing off his six-pack. "My lady," the show-off said with an elaborate bow.

Allie shook her head. "Just Allie, please. Galen, this is Sven. Sven, Galen is an environmental engineer who's in charge of Maintenance for the Colony. He's the one who's been working on your water problem with the tuna tanks." She took a deep breath. "Galen, Sven is – "

"The Patriarch of the Green Line, and every mermaid's wet dream," Sven finished smoothly. He peeled off his pants and dived into the nearest pool. When he surfaced, the man had turned emerald green, from his head down to the tips of his tail flukes. "As you can see."

Galen couldn't seem to close his mouth. The man had turned into a mer...well, not a mermaid. A merman, maybe. If he had man parts under that tail somewhere. Maybe Mer really did spawn like fish.

The other men who'd arrived with Sven stripped and entered the water, too. They changed and surfaced, each a slightly different colour. Not all of them were the monochrome of Sven the show-off, though – most of the Mer were flesh-coloured above the waist, and only their tails took on a different hue. Including – Galen gulped – the women. Two of what he'd thought were men turned to face him in the water, their bare breasts on full display. He didn't know where to look, and if Allie caught him staring at some other woman's breasts...

"You missed all the fun, Allie," one of the men said, emerging from the water with a handful of small fish. He lifted one wriggling fish high into the air, then swallowed it whole. "After you left, a trio of tiger shifters stumbled out of the bar and started picking fights with the Humans in the square. It

turned into a brawl of about thirty people before the Watch broke it up. We might have to sell...what do Humans call it? Popcorn, that's it. We might have to start selling popcorn and seats for that sort of entertainment."

Allie frowned. "Why didn't you break it up?"

The man spread his arms wide. "Do I look like a siren? I don't calm mobs. If Humans and Titans want to fight, we won't interfere. Let the lesser beings fight out their frustrations with each other. Mer farm fish and keep their own counsel. If we're forced to watch as part of our participation in this community, fine. We'll bring snacks." He swallowed another fish, then dived under for more.

Allie let out an exasperated sigh. "Sven, Galen wanted to know if everyone's here, or if anyone's missing."

Sven surveyed the pools. "No, this is everyone. Why, is he looking to mate with someone? One of the younger mermaids might be curious about getting with a Human. She might eat him alive, too. He's not exactly the bravest of them, is he? He nearly pissed himself when I changed."

He had not pissed himself. "I've never seen a man shapeshift into a fish before," Galen said stiffly. "I didn't know you could do that."

Sven grinned. "Humans know very little about the Mer, and with good reason. They'd know even less if it wasn't for..." He exchanged a pointed glance with Allie, who shook her head. "So you've never met a Mer before, or at least, you didn't think you had. You could have seen any of us walking around the Colony and not known we were Mer."

Could Mer read minds, too? Galen suppressed a shiver.

"Is there anyone you recognise, Galen?" Allie asked.

"No," he said firmly. He'd never seen so many bare breasts in one place, and it was making him more than a little hot under the collar, plus a few other places, too. He didn't want to look too closely at the women. Especially not in front of Allie. None of them had an orange tail, which meant none of them was Halcyon. That meant she could be roaming anywhere in the Colony, looking for all the world like a normal woman. He didn't know what her face looked like, only her tail. He could have walked past her today and not recognised her. "We should go," he said urgently.

"All right," Allie said. She inclined her head to Sven. "Thank you. I should head home. It's been a long day."

Sven's face fell.

Galen felt an irresistible urge to grin at the merman's disappointment. Did the fish have a crush on Allie?

"Don't forget your fish," Sven said. "I'd offer to deliver it to your apartment, but then I'd have to put clothes on." A few of the Mer within earshot laughed.

Someone climbed out of the water and returned with a cooler box that she handed to Allie.

"Thanks, Leukosia. You don't know how long it's been since I had fresh fish." Allie clutched the box to her chest.

Galen held out his arms. "Let me take that for you."

Allie surrendered the box, and one of the mermen muttered something in a language Galen didn't understand. Whatever he'd said, it didn't sound complimentary. Allie glared at him and gave him a one-fingered salute that evidently meant the same in Mer as it did in Human.

Galen waited until they'd reached the entrance to what he'd now think of as the Mer nudist colony before he said, "Did you understand what he said?"

Allie nodded grimly. "He said you were insulting me, calling me weak by taking the box. He suggested I show my strength by...um, avenging the insult. With violence."

Galen stopped. "I figured they were making a joke at my expense. If I'd known...want me to go back there and sort him out?"

"I don't need you to fight my battles, Galen. Besides, they'd only say it was an even bigger insult. I'd have to do something to you then."

"I could never fight you," Galen said. "I'd be too scared I'd hurt you."

Allie smiled, but said nothing as she summoned an aircar. The box was too bulky for a skimmer.

"What are you going to do with all that fish?" Galen asked.

"Eat it, of course." She stared at him. "But not tonight. Let's drop this off at my place, then go out for dinner again. My treat."

"Last night you saved my life. I'm pretty sure I owe you a lifetime's worth of dinners for that," Galen began, seeing his opportunity.

"That depends. How good are you at cleaning and gutting fish?" Allie asked, laughing, as she boarded the aircar. The aircar was crowded, so he had to sit on the other side from her, where his proposal once again went unsaid. At dinner, he promised himself, or afterwards. Then he'd ask her for forever.

CHAPTER 1

All through dinner, Allie fought to find the fortitude to tell Galen who she really was. She wasn't afraid of his reaction. She'd seen hatred in countless Human eyes before, just because they knew she was a Titan. It's just that last night had been the most pleasurable night in her memory, and she didn't want to hurt him. Was one more night with him too much to ask? It wasn't like he'd hate her any more in the morning than if she told him now.

When the waiter delivered dessert, Galen clasped his hands together on the table and said, "Allie, I need to ask you something important."

She already knew what it would be, but silently she begged the universe for one more night.

Allie set down her spoon, then held up both hands to stop him. "What with everything that happened last night and today, I'm not sure I can take any more. The only thing I want to do tonight is to climb into bed with you and spend the whole night believing there's no one else in the universe but us, and the most important thing in life is for us to see as many stars as possible."

Galen's jaw dropped. "And by stars you mean...?"

Allie blushed and stared down at her plate. "All the times I screamed your name last night, it was because you made me see stars."

"I'd like to give you every star in the sky, Allie," he said, his eyes starting to smoulder.

They paid the bill and called for a skimmer. Galen's arms wrapped around Allie as he stepped up behind her, and she pushed back against him, grinding her bottom against his crotch until he was so hard that his pants were probably feeling uncomfortably tight.

"Stars, Allie. If you keep doing that, I might have to lay you down right here on this skimmer," Galen groaned in her ear.

Allie laughed softly as she pressed against him again. "I'm pretty sure there's a law against that."

"I don't care."

Yes, this was the right thing to do, she thought as the skimmer pulled up outside her apartment. They made it inside, but that's all the decorum they had time for. Before the hatch had completely slid shut behind them, Galen pinned her to the wall. A quick struggle loosened their pants enough to give him access and he plunged deep inside her to the tune of matching moans from both their throats.

Allie wrapped her legs around his hips, drawing him deeper still. Yes, this was exactly what she wanted. Galen's powerful lovemaking with all the wild abandon she'd never known from anyone else. Her first orgasm took her by surprise, though not Galen, judging by the way he chuckled when she cried out.

"Enough stars for you, sweetheart?" he asked, slowing his pace but not stopping.

"So many," she sighed blissfully. "But I want more."

"Then I'm taking you to bed." Strong hands cupped her bottom, holding him inside her as he carried her to the bed. Galen sat down, so that Allie sat in his lap.

She unfastened her legs from around him and tugged her pants all the way off. He'd lost his pants somewhere along the way, so now it was skin on skin as she knelt astride him, clenching hard at the burning heat he still held between her thighs.

"I need to taste your breasts," he said, peeling off her shirt. "I saw all those mergirls with their tits out and the only thing I could think of was how much I wanted yours."

Allie laughed. "If I'd been sitting naked in that pool, I'm sure you wouldn't have looked twice at me, not with all those women to choose from."

"If I saw you naked in that pool, I'd have stripped off and joined you. No matter how many Mer were watching." Galen seized her hips, and spoke slowly so that each word matched his thrusts, "I love you, Allie. I only want you. Forever."

Tears sprang to her eyes. Not since Ceyx had anyone ever...

Allie screamed as her second orgasm engulfed her. She couldn't stop the tears now. But she could give him stars. A whole galaxy to match the pleasure he gave her. She grasped his shoulders, rocking her hips as she

rode him hard, letting her core clamp down on him as she felt her third climax building, bigger than the first two. As big as the man inside her, giving her so much more than she'd ever hoped for.

"Oh, fuck. Stars, Allie!" he shouted as he reached his peak, barely a moment before she hit hers.

"I love you, too, Galen," she murmured, kissing his neck.

And that was why tomorrow would be terrible but tonight...tonight the universe existed for them alone, so they could share all the stars.

CHAPTER 1

Galen didn't want to get out of bed. Allie had woken him twice in the middle of the night to make love, and the way she was stirring now, she might be about to ask again. She didn't need to ask. Galen let his fingers trail across her breast, down her side and across her belly to her thigh. "Good morning, sweetheart," he whispered as he slid the tip of his finger inside her, stroking gently.

"Mm." She snuggled closer to him. "I hope you're planning on using more than just one finger to wake me up."

"Two?" He demonstrated.

"Think harder, Galen. And bigger. Oh, yes!"

One very enjoyable hour later, Galen had to admit they needed to get up or they'd be late for work. If this was life with Allie, it was better than anything he could have imagined. He'd do anything to keep it that way.

Allie's comm beeped just as he was getting into the shower, so she reluctantly left him to shower alone to take the call. She still wasn't back when Galen was clean, so he turned off the water and headed out to the living area in a towel to see what had kept her.

"Check again, Col," she said, her eyes darting from her tablet to the wall screen, which both showed schematics of the Colony.

"What are you looking for?" Galen asked.

"Something that's not there, Col says, which is not possible, seeing as it was before. I have time to sort this before my first fitout this morning, but I might head out to the spots where it's found an anomaly, just to make sure." Allie frowned at the screen.

"Want me to bring you breakfast?" he asked.

She waved him away. "I'll be fine. I'll pick up something on the way. Today's not going to be as nice as yesterday. Meet you for dinner, maybe?"

"It's a date," Galen replied, kissing her cheek. He wanted more – so much more – but he was already late, so he hurried into his clothes and headed out. He could ask her tonight.

When he reached his office, a box half hidden under his desk caught his eye. It was a pump box – the one that still held the other half of the plutonium. He couldn't believe he'd just left it lying here like this, but he'd thought it was uranium, and not enough to cause trouble. Now he knew better, he just wanted it gone.

Galen heaved the box onto the desk and opened it. He took a deep breath before he lifted the lid of the lead-lined box inside. Sure enough, two rods remained, and they were hot to the touch. It was enough to blow up the entire Colony, Allie had said, so that meant these leftovers were just as dangerous. It needed to be locked away where no one would find it and use it.

The Watch had presumably done that with the first two rods, so they must have a suitable storage facility. He'd tell them one of the staff had found it in one of the other main pumping stations. Arbor Dome, maybe. Let the Watch draw whatever conclusions they liked from that.

Then he was done. Done building bombs; done trying to track down terrorists; done with the hunt and everything to do with that bloody siren Halcyon.

Because he didn't want to draw her attention to himself, as that would only put Allie at risk. He'd give up anything to protect Allie, because she was his future. His parents would understand, he was sure. They'd want him to be happy. And if killing Halcyon risked letting something bad happen to Allie...he'd never forgive himself.

His parents were gone, and nothing could bring them back. But Allie was living, breathing hope, and all he had left.

Galen dropped onto his chair, borne down by the sheer enormity of his decision. No more revenge. No more hunting for Halcyon. He'd have to find a hobby.

Feeling lighter, he pulled his music player out of his desk drawer and slipped the headphones over his ears. He turned up the volume and found himself singing along as he read through his morning messages. Nothing could budge his good mood today.

CHAPTER 1

Allie's communications chip told her she had an incoming message from Col about the AI's radiation scan. Not wanting to bother Galen with it, she headed for the living room so she could put the map up on the wall screen.

"How many locations?" Allie asked, pulling on some pants.

"Four point sources, plus three travel paths," the AI replied.

"Where is it now?" She clipped her bra.

"Unknown. No current radiation signatures match the profile."

Allie swore. That didn't make sense. Unless the plutonium was well shielded. Maybe their amateur was only pretending not to know what he or she was doing.

"Show me all the locations," she commanded, reaching for her shirt.

Half the Colony lit up. Three spots in Metropolis, plus one in the Aqua Dome, and a blue beam connecting them all and the route to Ira's office.

"Remove the travel routes," she said, savagely twisting the buttons as she fastened her shirt.

The beams vanished, leaving four blue blotches. "Zoom in to the site in Metropolis."

Allie blinked as the overlapping blotches separated into three different sites within the Maintenance building. A storage room, the workshop, and...no, that couldn't be right.

"Check again, Col," she ordered.

Her heart beat faster at the sight of Galen wearing nothing but a low-slung towel, but she fought to ignore it. She'd love to take him back to bed and not have to go to work, but this was too important. She'd planned on telling him the truth this morning anyway, so it was time to steel her heart against the inevitable rejection she'd suffer when he found out about her past. First,

she had to find the remaining plutonium and ensure the safety of the Colony. Then she could hand him her heart so he could blow it to bits.

She almost broke her resolve when he kissed her cheek. It would have been so easy to turn her head and offer him her lips instead. She forced herself to focus on the screen, though it showed nothing of interest right now.

Allie didn't allow herself to relax until the hatch had slid shut behind Galen, sealing him out of her life. While the AI completed its scan, she reached into the refrigerator for a snack. Sven had given her enough fish for a week, and her mouth watered at the thought. It had taken almost all of her self control last night not to strip off and join the other Mer as they caught their dinner fresh, but Galen would never have understood. And she'd wanted one more night with him...so the small sacrifice had been worth it.

The scan still wasn't finished, so Allie reached for another fillet. It sure beat ration bars.

"Scan complete. Additional source identified," the AI said.

"Where? Show me."

Allie's heart contracted in her chest as the map showed her the Maintenance building again. "Show me the building in 3D, as it is now."

"Additional source has disappeared."

Allie swore. "Show me where it was."

A blinking blue light appeared, almost directly on top of another spot dated several weeks previously. Allie was afraid to ask, so she looked for the other sites next. One was in a supply room, and the other was in the workshop. The radiation source in the supply room had sat there for weeks, since before the Colony was inhabited. Whoever had planted it had to have been on the construction crew, or it had arrived with the supplies. The workshop had seen a radiation source several times over the weeks they'd lived in the Colony. Whoever had carried it there was definitely a resident.

"Show me radioactivity in brightness levels," she said.

The spot in the Aqua Dome dimmed to about half what the others were. All except the additional source Col had found today.

She couldn't avoid it any longer. Weeks ago, before the source had moved to the workshop, it had sat in one spot, almost exactly where it had briefly sat today. It shouldn't be possible, but Allie had to believe it was. Whoever had built the original bomb had only taken half of their plutonium to the

Aqua Dome. And they still had the remainder, ready to blow this place sky high on a whim. She wouldn't let that happen.

Allie summoned a skimmer and climbed numbly onto the footboard. She missed the warm, solid feel of Galen standing behind her, but she needed to forget all that now. Forget her feelings, forget everything she loved about him, and focus on what was important.

It was far too short a trip to the Maintenance building in the bowels of Metropolis, but Allie told herself it was for the best. Logic told her she should call the Watch for backup, but she dismissed that idea. She could handle one man on her own. Once she'd found out what she needed to know, THEN the Watch could have him.

She strode into the building with a confidence she didn't feel, not today. She didn't slow until she reached the entrance to the office she was after. Then, she paused in the open doorway, wishing she was wrong, but knowing she wasn't.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

No answer. Galen kept his eyes on the screen in front of him, ignoring her.

"I asked you why you did it. I saved your life. I have a right to know."

His lips moved, and he started singing faintly. Still he ignored her.

Allie noticed his peculiar ear coverings, with which he somehow blocked out all sound, including her voice. That's how he'd survived the *Poseidon*. He'd never heard her song, never fallen asleep like the other passengers, which is why he'd made it to the lifeboat when the alarms sounded, because he had heard those. She should have sunk the lifeboat while she had the chance, all those years ago.

"Allie!" With a practised motion, Galen pulled his headphones down so they circled his neck. His smile died as he took in the tears streaming down her face. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She was not sweet. Allie surveyed the desk. Where the blue spots had glowed, now she saw only a box for a residential pump. The same sort of pump she'd found hollowed out and full of explosives in the Aqua Dome main pumping station. "It's in here, isn't it?" She reached for the box.

So did Galen, but she was faster.

"Don't, sweetheart. It's dangerous. One of the other guys found it in the Arbor Dome main pumping station, where – "

"Don't lie to me." She lifted the box lid, and felt a surge of triumph as she saw another box, and not a pump, inside. She opened the box, peering in

just long enough to confirm that she was right, before she threw the whole thing back on Galen's desk. "I had to see it for myself, or I wouldn't have believed it. I saved your life. I helped you. I stood up for you against the Watch, when they would have...not that it matters now. I can admit when I'm wrong. When I've been so stupid, so blinded, by the man I thought was my friend."

Galen stared at her. "I am your friend. More than that, if you'll let me. Allie, I – "

"I don't want to hear it," she snapped. "All I want to know is why. Why you did it."

Still he stared, as if he didn't understand.

"You planted that bomb in the pumping station. You built it. You nearly nuked the whole Colony with all of us in it. I want to know why."

"I..." Galen swallowed. "It was an accident."

Allie snorted. "Stardust."

"It was!" he insisted. "I built the bomb, sure, and I planted it. I only took half the plutonium because I thought it was uranium, and I wouldn't have enough for it to reach critical mass. I calculated the explosive charge perfectly. It would have damaged the pumping station, but left the dome structurally sound, and contaminated it with enough radiation to make it look like she did it."

"Like who did it?" Allie demanded.

"Halcyon. The siren who killed my parents, sank the *Poseidon* and murdered thousands of other people."

Allie bit her lip. "Fifteen hundred and sixty-two. Not thousands. And every single one of those was killed in an act of war. They were not civilians."

"She murdered more than a thousand people. Including my parents. They deserve justice."

Allie shook her head. "It's not murder when military personnel are killed in battle. Even if it was, the peace treaty signed by both Humans and Titans declared a general amnesty so no one on either side could be accused of war crimes once the treaty was signed. Anyone who killed or tortured was absolved of their guilt, so that all the atrocities would stop. It was the price we had to pay for peace."

"Not me. I didn't choose it. I wasn't the only one, either. The Humans First organisation offered to help me find her."

"They're nothing but a bunch of suicide bombers, and the racist bigots who recruit and arm them. They wanted you to blow yourself up with thousands of innocent civilians, and you nearly did." Tears formed in Allie's eyes again. "You almost destroyed all chance of peace between our peoples, and for what? One woman?"

Galen wet his lips. "Allie, I – "

"Then take your shot, Human." Allie threw her arms wide. "Your search is over and no one else needs to die. Enough people have been hurt. I lost the man I loved and gained a psychotic stalker. Where's the justice in that?"

She took pity on Galen's confusion. "I'm Halcyon. I killed all those people, including your father, Doctor Claudius Tasker, the man who lured my husband into a trap by promising to share his scientific findings, then tortured him to death before my eyes. He deserved to die, so I made sure he did. And crazed with grief, a siren's grief, which you can't even begin to understand, I sang his funeral dirge. A song that drove whoever heard it to die. Your music machine saved you, so you never knew what killed them. Every Titan knows what a siren is capable of, which is why they don't harm us. That's why the Mer are all pacifists, serving as mediators in a conflict because if Mer fight, only they will win. We know that, so we abstain. We tried – the Mer Council decreed that we'd take no part in the war – but Humans didn't listen. They captured my husband and tortured him for information. When they attacked him, they attacked all the Mer. So my people gave me permission to retrieve him, or seek justice as I saw fit."

Allie sucked in a deep breath, swiping at her tears. Now was not the time.

"I saw the torture chambers. Ceyx was killed in one, but there were many others, and they all showed signs of use. Prisoners were kept on Human ships and interrogated under torture before they were killed. I saw the mutilated bodies, and made sure their tormentors suffered. So I knew, when we declared that amnesty, that I had at least brought some to justice. I came to realise that the only way to stop Humans from torturing Titans was to either kill them all or end the war, and to that end, I agreed to mediate the treaty. I am the only living Mer to have gone to war, and Titans remember the stories. They know who and what I am, and they fear me because of it. It's only Humans like you who think I need something as crude as a weapon to destroy this place. I am a living weapon, but I will not be used against my people.

"So kill me now, if you must. I will die for the sake of peace, to keep you from killing anyone else. I'm no innocent. I have the blood of hundreds on my hands. There is no one left who loves me enough to mourn me, and the Mer have sworn they will not avenge me. So kill me."

Still Galen stared at her. "Allie, I...Halcyon." He swallowed. "I can't."

CHAPTER 1

Allie – Halcyon – waved at the box on the desk. "Fine. Be a coward. But if you use that to kill all the people in the Colony instead, you'll be a worse man than your father ever was. You'll be sealing the fate of your entire species, because the remaining sirens will not let such a deed go unpunished. I'm ashamed to think I considered you a friend. You are what you call us – monsters." She turned on her heel and stalked out of his office. Perhaps even out of his life.

"Allie, wait. Please," he begged, but she didn't return. Why would she? She was right. He was horrified at the thought that he'd nearly detonated a nuclear weapon here, in a city full of civilians. With children, for stars' sake. It was small comfort to know that he hadn't killed anyone. He'd planned it, and come so close to executing that plan that it was a miracle the Colony was still standing.

Saved by Halcyon. She'd saved him and the city. And he loved her, because she was Allie.

Though she had every right to hate him.

Galen buried his head in his hands. He hated himself.

He wasn't sure how much later it was when the Watch came for him. Minutes, maybe even hours, but he wasn't aware of the passage of time. Only the crushing weight of guilt that he knew he deserved.

"Mr Galen Tasker?" a female voice asked.

"Yes." The word came out as a barely audible whisper. Galen didn't want to be himself right now. Not ever.

"You're under arrest for possession of a weapon of mass destruction. I'm to request you come with us willingly, or we'll press additional charges for acts of terrorism, resisting arrest..." she continued in the same vein for a little while, but Galen wasn't listening any more.

He didn't care. He deserved everything he got for what he'd done, and for what he'd almost done. The universe would be safer with him locked away where he couldn't hurt anyone again.

Galen rose to his feet and held out his arms for handcuffs. The things his mind could imagine and his hands could build...better if both were restrained. He only wished there were a way to turn his brain off, too, so he no longer felt or thought.

"Bring the box," the woman in charge ordered to one of her underlings as she and another Watch officer seized Galen's arms to march him outside to a waiting aircar. "And be careful with it," she called over her shoulder.

Galen kept his head down, not caring where they took him. It was either a holding cell or a shuttle off-planet. When they reached the Watch building, his escort guided him left instead of right, toward the offices belonging to high-ranking members of the Watch, as opposed to the cellblock. Perhaps the interrogation rooms were this way, Galen told himself. Or maybe they had torture chambers like his father once had, and they kept them close to the offices so the bigwigs didn't have as far to walk to get their sadistic urges satisfied.

If he survived the torture, or even if he didn't, he should try and get a note to Allie, telling her about it so she could deal with those who did it. Maybe the universe would be a better place with Halcyon loose. His life had been.

"Don't know what you're smiling about," the Watchwoman muttered, tugging on Galen's arm to keep him walking.

Her companion opened a door at the end of the corridor and pushed Galen inside.

"Mr Tasker, sir," the woman said before she shut the door behind Galen, leaving him alone with...

Ira, the man in charge of the Watch, and the whole Colony, or so Galen had been told.

"Take a seat, Mr Tasker." Ira gestured to one of the chairs in front of his desk. Identical chairs to the ones where Galen had sat with Allie when he'd tried to frame her for his own stupidity.

Galen shook his head. "I prefer to stand."

"Suit yourself. I take it you know why you're here."

Galen started to shake his head, but another Watch officer stepped into the room, dropped the incriminating box on Ira's desk, and left. Galen sagged. He might not know exactly why he was here, but he had a damn good idea.

Ira began, "One Halcyon Mavros, an undercover Watch operative whose cover is her role as Colony plumber, initiated a search for radiation leaks. This morning, she reported several in the region of your office, Mr Tasker. When she investigated further, she found not just a radiation source, but what she identified as a weapon of mass destruction. On your desk."

"Does Halcyon really work for you?" Galen blurted out. "How do you know she's not just pretending to work for you while she'd biding her time, to pursue her own agenda?" What if everything she'd said and done with him had been a lie to seduce information out of him?

"Ms Mavros is not a patient woman, Mr Tasker, but she is an honest one. Perhaps a little too honest at times. I've worked with her since before the treaty was signed. Long enough to know that she will pursue her own agenda, no matter what you want her to do, and the only way to make sure she's following my plan is to make sure it shares the same goals as hers." Ira coughed. "If she says pigs are falling from the sky, then I would advise looking out the window, because you'll see a remarkable sight."

Galen's eyes darted to the window, but there weren't any pigs to see.

"I was speaking figuratively, of course," Ira added, his eyes glinting with amusement.

"So if she talked about people torturing prisoners..." Galen began, unsure how to finish.

"Then prisoners were tortured."

Galen wet his lips. "And her husband? Seeks, I think she said his name was?"

"Ceyx, yes," Ira said. "He was captured by Humans and tortured for information. The chief interrogator assigned to him was Claudius Tasker. Your father, I believe."

"She definitely killed him? And fifteen hundred...more than fifteen hundred other people?"

Ira frowned. "That number does seem high. Much higher than my estimates, but I imagine she'd know. If you asked her, she could probably tell you the names of each and every one of them."

Galen shook his head. "I don't think she wants to talk to me any more. Not after what I did."

Ira folded his hands on the table. "Tell me, Mr Tasker. What exactly did you do? Not the version you gave me last time. The truth, please."

So Galen told him everything, from his first contact with Humans First, finding the nuclear fuel they'd smuggled into the Colony, building and planting the bomb, right up until he arrived in Ira's office today. It felt good to get everything out in the open. After all, what did he have left to lose? Nothing.

The only thing he didn't talk about was his personal time with Allie. That was...private. Glorious. And none of his blasted business.

As if the man had read his mind, Ira asked, "So what are your current intentions toward Ms Mavros?"

His intentions? He'd wanted to marry the woman. Galen wanted to go back in time a few hours, to when Allie was naked in his arms, and stay in bed. Forever. He wouldn't know she was a killer, and she wouldn't know he was an idiot, and everything would be perfect. If time travel were possible, he would, too.

"Is my operative in danger around you, Mr Tasker?"

Allie? Never. He couldn't hurt her. It didn't matter how many people she'd killed or who she was. She was still Allie. Galen couldn't live with himself if he hurt her. Even if she did hate him now.

"No. No, she's not," Galen said finally. "I don't intend to do anything with her, because I don't think she wants anything to do with me."

Ira nodded, glancing down at his tablet. "I have two choices here, Mr Tasker. I can ask you to repeat your confession so we can record it, as I seem to have forgotten to set up a recording device for our interview, and I can then have you shipped offworld for trial. Or, I could use your existing, recorded confession and that of Ms Mavros from earlier in the week, where she states her belief that your mind might have been in the control of another, such that your actions were not your own. If that were true, you might not need to be sent offworld at all. Your lesser offence would be under New Hope jurisdiction, which means I could sentence you to house arrest for a year. The likely terms would still allow you to live and work in the Colony, but when you leave your apartment, you would be escorted by a guard at all times."

"A year?" Galen expected a life sentence in prison if Ira sent him offworld. Why would his sentence here be so light?

"That could easily change, depending on your behaviour. Good behaviour might lessen your sentence, while any infractions, however small, could

lengthen it considerably, or make me change my decision and send you offworld after all. I'll receive monthly behaviour reports, of course."

Galen still didn't understand. There had to be some darker purpose to keeping him here. His eyes strayed to the pump box of plutonium. "What will happen to that?"

"It will be stored somewhere safe. With the rest of the radioactive material," Ira replied. "Now, I'm a busy man, Mr Tasker. Do you wish to repeat your new testimony so it can be recorded, before you are taken offworld, or would you prefer to return home under house arrest?"

Like there was a choice to make. "I'll stay."

Ira nodded. "Your guard will be waiting outside." He dismissed Galen with a wave of his hand.

Galen opened the door and stopped dead at the sight in the corridor. "So that's it. You don't expect me to survive the year."

CHAPTER 1

"You don't expect me to survive the year."

Allie wanted to cringe away from the hostility in Galen's eyes, but she forced her expression to remain neutral. Ira had made it clear that if Galen was to stay out of prison, she would have to be the one guarding him, because he wasn't about to allocate any of his other staff to such a menial assignment. Allie knew he wouldn't last five minutes in a prison. It wasn't like he'd killed anyone, and she truly didn't believe he would. She was willing to bet her life on it.

She was hurt that he thought so little of her that he believed she'd kill him, but she wasn't surprised. After all, he'd hated her for a decade, with good reason. Just because he'd slept with her when he'd thought she was someone else didn't mean he'd give up ten years of loathing. He probably hated her even more now for fooling him, however necessary it might have been.

"Have you changed your mind already, Mr Tasker?" Ira called.

Galen dropped his gaze to his handcuffed wrists. "No."

The door hissed shut behind him, leaving Galen alone in the corridor with Allie. He looked ready to bolt.

"I can take the handcuffs off now, if you like," she said, pressing her thumb to the scan panel. The cuffs clicked open. She was relieved to see Violet hadn't fastened them too tightly The cuffs had left no red marks on Galen's wrists. "Your ID chip is now coded to mine. You'll have to stay within a certain distance of me, or both the Watch and I will receive an alert. You can still go to work and you'll have some privacy, just...oh, and if Col spots you near an unusual radiation source, it'll notify me, too." She took in his slumped shoulders and the way he wouldn't look at her. "Would you rather go to prison?"

"Ask me in a month," he said bitterly. "His high and mightiness in there said it's still a possibility."

Not if she had any say in it, Allie vowed. Ira would get nothing but good reports about Galen, if she had to mind control the man herself to make him behave.

CHAPTER 1

For six weeks, Galen endured the conditions of his house arrest. The best and the worst part of it was Allie.

She wished him a good morning every day as she unlocked his apartment door to release him from captivity, walked him to work or worked alongside him if a maintenance job required two of them, and shared every meal with him in silence. At night, she wished him a good night before she locked him in and escaped to her own apartment, or a hot date, or whatever she chose to do with her freedom in the evenings.

More than once, he'd considered following her. He was an engineer, after all, and the door controls were hardly more complex than anything else he'd built. The only thing that stopped him was the thought of seeing her happy with someone else. He understood that she hated him now, seeing as she could barely stand to look at him, but he wasn't sure he could handle seeing the woman he loved in another man's arms. It was hard enough knowing he'd lost her through his own stupidity.

But it wasn't until they were working together on a bunch of blocked drains at the strip club that he noticed she wasn't singing any more. Allie had always sung or hummed something while she worked.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked her.

"Of course not," she said. "I have yet to meet anyone who can keep their lunch down after they've unblocked three toilets in a brothel and the fourth one looks like...looks...ugh."

She did look distinctly green, he realised, but that went right along with doing a disgusting job. The dark circles under her eyes were new, though. He tried to remember if she'd looked like this yesterday. "Yesterday, you missed lunch. Today, you're throwing up. Plumbing aside, what's wrong?"

"Nothing that won't go away on its own," she said. "Look, can we just finish this job so we can go do something else that doesn't stink like someone died in here?'

Galen nodded and switched the pump back on, but he found his eyes straying to her more and more as the day progressed. She seemed listless and tired, like she'd never been before. When the day ended, he'd made up his mind.

"I'm sick of eating by myself at home every night. Want to go out for pizza?" he asked her.

The eyes she turned on him looked almost haunted, they were so hollow. "I'm not hungry, and it's been a really long day. I'll go with you to pick up a takeaway pizza if you want, but then I'm going home."

If that was the best she had to offer, he'd take it. She called for an aircar instead of a skimmer, so they wouldn't have to travel as closely together, he guessed, but when she sank onto the seat with a little sigh, he wondered if it was more about her exhaustion than anything to do with him at all.

Despite her protests, he ordered a pizza for her as well as the one for him, knowing the seafood one was her favourite. He carried the boxes back on his lap in the aircar, grinning as several of the other passengers cast covetous glances at their dinner. Just as long as it tempted Allie into staying with him for the evening.

They arrived back at his apartment and he palmed open the door. "You coming in to join me for dinner, or are you taking yours home with you?" he asked, hoping she'd choose him.

"I'm really not hungry," she began, then clapped a hand to her mouth and bolted for his bathroom. Galen heard the sound of retching from behind the closed door.

He propped the pizza boxes open on his kitchen counter and grabbed two plates. He waited a few minutes for Allie to emerge from the bathroom, but when she didn't, he decided to eat a slice before it got cold. He could always reheat hers when she was ready.

He was three bites into his second slice when Allie staggered into the living area. She clutched at the doorjamb to stay upright and her face was paler than he'd ever seen it.

"You're not going anywhere like that. Come and sit down." Galen pointed at the dining chair across from him.

She almost made it, then stumbled as she reached the table. Galen grabbed her as she reached for him, and for the first time in weeks, he finally had her in his arms. He breathed in her scent – fresh, intoxicating and salty, like the sea, as always – and he almost moaned. He'd missed her so much.

"Let go of me. I'm fine," she said, grasping the table and hauling herself to her feet. She made it to her chair this time, but not without effort.

"You're not fine. Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or should I call a doctor?"

"Nothing's wrong!" she exploded. "Not yet, anyway. I'm pregnant, all right? This is normal."

Galen wanted to cry. She had moved on, finding some other man to seduce...no, some other Titan, he realised. It had to be, if the guy could get her knocked up.

"Whose is it?" he asked.

"Mine, for the moment," she said.

"I mean, who's the father?" Galen paused to think. "It was that green merman, wasn't it? I saw the way he looked at you. Like he wanted to cover you in cream and eat you."

"You mean Sven?" Allie snorted. "He wishes. He's had a crush on me since before he learned to turn his tail. He used to sneak off from the crèche to watch Ceyx and I, I'm sure of it. He might be a Patriarch now, but I remember when he was too small to swim."

"Who, then?" Galen persisted. He wanted to start an interspecies war with whoever the Titan man was.

"The only man I've slept with this year is you, Galen, so I'll give you one guess," Allie said. Before he could respond, she added, "Not that it matters. I can't carry a child to term. Five miscarriages have taught me that. Ceyx said it was the combination of his genes and mine, but I knew better. It was me. There's a reason no one else has a tail the colour of mine. Inbred is what I am, because the Mer community aboard our ship was so small, genetic diversity was damn near impossible. So I'll have to endure a few weeks more of morning sickness before I miscarry this one, too, in a wave of blood and pain. The universe never meant me to be a mother. I should have learned my lesson by now." She inhaled deeply. "You know, I think I will have some of that pizza. It smells really good."

Galen stared as Allie picked up a slice and took a huge bite.

Not sick. Pregnant. With his child. It wasn't possible.

"But we're different species. We can't breed," he said.

"Stardust. That's what they want you to think. Ceyx discovered we could and he died to protect his secret." Allie finished her slice of pizza and reached for another. "It doesn't matter, anyway. She won't live long enough to surface."

"You mean be born?"

Allie shook her head. "Surface. Cross-race Mer children are always female, born to swim. Mer give birth in the water, and the first thing she'll learn is to surface, closing her gills to breathe through her lungs. Later, she'll learn to turn her tail so she can walk like us."

Galen couldn't help laughing at the image that popped into his head. "You mean our daughter will be a mermaid?"

"Galen, don't get attached. In a few weeks – "

Galen pressed a finger to her lips. "I'm not an expert in genetics, but you said your husband was. If you say his genes made you miscarry because you're too closely related, that doesn't mean mine will. In fact, a couple can't get more diverse than the two of us."

Allie didn't pull away this time, as his eyes held hers. "We're not a couple any more," she said. "You've made it abundantly clear that you hate me for what I did to your family."

"No, I haven't. You're the one who told me I was worse than my father because of what I nearly did to the city." Galen grasped her hands. "I don't care what you did in the past. I love you because of what you've done for me since I met you here. You've saved my life, stopped me from doing something incredibly stupid, and made every day I spend with you a pleasure. Even the ones where I don't get to sleep with you. I love you, Allie." He pressed a hand to her still-flat belly. "And I'm going to love her, too, when she's born. Even if she has a tail."

"But what if – "

"I'm going to take such good care of you, nothing will hurt this baby. I'll pay every credit I have to keep a doctor at your side round the clock until she's born." Galen swallowed. "If you'll let me. I mean, I'm under house arrest. I can't be with you every moment, even if I want to be."

For the first time in weeks, Allie actually smiled. "Actually, Ira never said it had to be your house you stayed in. You could come live with me. There's more than enough space for two at my place. Maybe even three, if she survives."

"She will," Galen swore. "I'll start building her a crib in the workshop tomorrow on my lunch break. What else will you need? Just tell me and I'll do it."

Allie blushed. "Actually, there's one thing that's different about this pregnancy. Something I never experienced before. When I'm not feeling ill, I crave sex like you wouldn't believe. Alone at night in my apartment, so many nights now, I imagined I was with you once more and...it's not the same, a poor shadow of the reality, but I want...you."

"I'm yours if you want me," Galen said. "Now and forever. Halcyon...Allie, I love you. Anything you want, you just have to ask."

"Stay with me, Galen. Sleep with me. Love me like...like I love you," she said.

"As my lady wishes," he replied. He hoisted her in his arms and carried her to his bed. As he set her on the mattress, Galen said, "You know, there's an old Human saying that would be perfect for us. Make love, not war."

Allie laughed and pulled off her shirt. "Yes, Galen. Make no more war. And love...it's such a strange phrase you Humans have. I never thought of love as something you can make. It's created, yes, but born out of so many things shared between two people. You make me feel love for you, and I want to...we would call it joining, where two people become one so completely it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. When you make love to me, there is only us, and a universe of stars."

CHAPTER 1

Galen crossed the aquaculture farm to the temporary apartment he shared with Allie until her time came. Any day now, the Mer doctor had said, and Allie had agreed. She looked ready to burst, and she'd taken to spending more time in the water than on land. He was fairly certain that's why the Watch had lifted his house arrest early. Not that he liked to be away from Allie for long, but when she got cravings for things, he'd scour Metropolis to get her what she needed.

Today it was chocolate, which he left on the counter in their empty apartment. She must be in one of the pools again, or in the Mer habitat proper, where they lived underwater. Allie had invited him in there a couple of times, giving him a rebreather so he could stay under for as long as she did, but he didn't feel comfortable in what he felt was nothing but a giant fish tank. Not to mention the Mer were a bunch of hippy nudists, which he wasn't sure he'd ever get used to.

Galen stripped down to a pair of board shorts. He wasn't ready to join the nudists, but he did want to sit with Allie in the water.

He spotted Leukosia as he passed the tuna pools. "Have you seen Allie?" he asked.

"Try the birthing pool," she said.

Allie had gone into labour already? Galen broke into a run.

The birthing pool was warm, wide and shallow, filled with Mer bodies of every colour. Every colour except orange.

"Where is she?" he asked urgently.

"I'm here," Allie's voice said, sounding strained.

Now he saw her – looking like a naked Human woman, not a mermaid, in the middle of the pool.

"She's coming, Galen," Allie cried, reaching for his hand as she gritted her teeth through a contraction.

The Mer women made space for him, and for once he didn't notice their nakedness. He had eyes only for Allie.

"She's crowning. Push again!" one of the Mer women said, peering intently between Allie's legs. She swished her tail impatiently. "Now. Push hard now!"

Allie screamed until she ran out of air, but still she pushed, panting for breath.

"Again!" the Mer doctor ordered.

Allie obeyed, but the look of agony on her face as she cried out to the stars above tore Galen's heart in two.

"You need to give her something for the pain. Can't you see how much this is hurting her?" Galen demanded.

No one listened.

"One more!"

Allie squeezed Galen's had so hard he wanted to cry out, but he stayed strong for her. He had to.

"Oooh!" the surrounding crowd sang, as something small and rust-coloured shot between Allie's legs in a cloud of blood.

One of them caught the baby and brought her squirming to her mother's arms. Her tail made her look like a salmon, shimmery silver-pink, but her eyes were the colour of sage.

"Her name!" the Mer chanted. "What is her name?"

Galen ignored them, reaching to stroke his daughter's cheek. "She has my mother's eyes," he said softly, finding it hard to swallow.

"Then her name is Panacea," Allie said.

Galen knew he'd never told her his mother's name. Ira's words came back to him then – Allie might have killed hundreds of people during the war, but she knew every name. Allie was many things, but not a monster. And because of her, Panacea Tasker lived again, sired in the impossible union between two races that might one day learn to live in peace.

In the future, they would call times like these halcyon days, where peace reigned and no storm raged. For sometimes the universe needed a halcyon, a siren who could both call and calm the storm.

If you'd like a sneak peek from Sven's story, *Poseidon*, which you can get HERE, read on...

CHAPTER 1

On a planet far from home, a solitary merman carved up corpses to sell to unsuspecting Humans in the morning.

The entrails were already in the bins out the back, waiting for the waste personnel to dispose of the evidence of tonight's carnage, because Sven was nothing if not efficient. He did like to take his time with the flesh, though, slicing it up to make it as attractive as possible to a potential buyer.

He shook his head. He didn't understand Humans. Not at all. What could be attractive about a piece of dead flesh, usually hours or even days old, sometimes even frozen for who knew how long, instead of a live body that writhed beneath you in its death throes as you decided it was the one that would have to die for your dinner?

Gah, it was enough to make him hungry just thinking about it. He should finish up and head home, like the others had. He'd done plenty for today, and he could always do more tomorrow.

A bang and a splash sounded from the front of the shop.

"Hello?" Sven called, lifting his knife so that blood ran down the blade onto his fingers, where it blended in with the rest.

A splash, then the squeak of flesh hitting the side of a glass tank and being scraped along it.

"Stop fighting." Bloody teenagers. Didn't matter what species, the males always seemed to want to fight. Even his kind, though it'd been centuries since any of them had. Except for Halcyon, of course, but she was special. All kinds of special.

And the reason he was in the back of the shop, late at night, hacking bits up instead of at home with his own people. He should be there, paying attention to one of the lovely girls who thought the leader of the Mer community in the Colony was important enough to spend time with. Instead of ignoring him for some Human who could scarcely swim.

With one savage blow, Sven severed another head and focussed on slicing the finest fillets on New Hope. Perhaps in the whole Altan system. Humans

just didn't deserve them.

CHAPTER 1

When Minali returned to the Watch office, she was surprised to hear applause. Had someone broken the doughnut eating record already? There wasn't a doughnut to be seen, but then there wouldn't be, if someone had eaten them all, she reasoned.

Lieutenant Diamond, her supervisor, appeared in front of her, holding out his hand. "Good going, Detective Burman." He nearly crushed her fingers, he shook her hand so hard. "And Detective Small, too. Biggest drug bust in the history of the Colony!" Diamond beamed. "And we all thought it was drones flying in somehow. Where did you get the idea they were using the prostitutes to bring it in?"

Phil Burman opened his mouth to reply, by Minali got in first. "It was Phil. He thought of body cavity searches. I didn't think it was a good idea at first." She grimaced as she remembered the terror on the girl's face when Phil had mentioned the search as a joke. What kind of prostitute was terrified of being penetrated? Either she'd made a very poor job choice or she had something to hide. Gambling on the latter, Minali had called Phil's bluff and insisted on the search. And hit paydirt. "But it never hurts to be thorough, so..."

Laughter echoed around the office. Minali was glad the girls couldn't hear it down in the cells. They'd be up on minor charges with a night or two in the cells and a fine, no more, but their boss would probably be shipped offplanet to face the authorities on Elysium. Elysium had a zero tolerance policy on drug dealers, and a dim view on sex slavery, too. He wouldn't see daylight again for a long, long time.

"It feels so good to wrap this case up, I'm going for a beer. Who's with me?" Phil shouted. "To the Moon and Sixpence!"

A chorus of shouts told him half the office was up for a drink, it being a Friday night and all.

"You coming, babe?" Phil asked Minali.

She shook her head. "That report won't write itself."

Phil laughed. "After a couple of beers, you bet it will! Come with us."

"No."

His smile faltered for a moment, before he hitched it back up. "All right then, I'll have one for you. You better be home before I am, though, 'cause that bed's sure cold without you."

If anyone in the office hadn't known he was her partner in more than the professional sense, they did now. Whoops and catcalls followed his words as the mass exodus began, leaving only Minali behind.

She slumped down at her desk, wishing she could one day meet a man, any man, whose life didn't involve drinking copious amounts of alcohol at the local pub. From her drunkard father to her equally inebriated ex-husband, her experience with alcohol only led to violence, anger and pain. Hers, more often than not, and she bore the scars to prove it. Back before her dad had drunk himself to death and she'd showed up in hospital with a broken bottle embedded in her shoulder, courtesy of her loving ex-husband, she might have considered going for a drink. One drink couldn't hurt, right?

But her shoulder ached, reminding her that it could.

Sighing, she got to work. She'd rather write up the report, anyway, closing this week with the successful end to a difficult case so she'd have a fresh assignment in the morning. She'd take anything that didn't involve body cavity searches of Titans. She shuddered. Some of those creatures had fur or scales or more orifices than any being should have. Give her Humans any day. At least they made sense, biologically.

CHAPTER 1

The Moon and Sixpence thrummed with energy tonight, and it coursed through Bolina as readily as it did all the other bar patrons. Ever the red-haired cook seemed to be affected by it, as she peeped hungrily through the serving window as if searching for someone.

Bolina smiled, not needing to search. She had eyes for only one man, and he didn't know she existed. Maybe she'd work up the courage to change that tonight.

She glided between patrons, wanting to be near him, even if he didn't look at her. She dodged around a Watch officer who had a woman on each arm while he piggybacked a third, and almost bumped into him. She laid a hand on his arm to steady herself before she'd realised what she was doing. The contact was electric, holding her in place so she couldn't let go.

An incubus on the other side of the bar, high on the energy in the room, did something to intensify it. A casual spark blazed into a raging bushfire of lust.

His eyes turned on her, taking in her fingers on his arm before settling on her face. Impossibly, recognition flared in his eyes.

"You!" he cried, loud enough to be heard over the music. "The girl of my dreams. Come here!"

As if in a dream, Bolina felt his arms wrap around her, reeling her in closer so that her body pressed against his. She melted in his embrace, barely believing such a thing was possible.

Then he pressed his lips against hers as he kissed her.

Bolina reeled, lost in the sensation as he set her lips, her tongue and then her whole body afire. How could one body – no, two, because they were so intertwined right now that he undoubtedly shared what she was feeling – contain so much emotion and energy without bursting?

She couldn't – she was certain she couldn't. Breathless, panting, she pulled away from him. These feelings, these sensations, were too heady for her. Too much for one night.

Bolina stumbled through the crowd, intent on reaching the door and the cool night air outside. Her knees had gone strangely weak, so it felt like wading through neck-deep water as well as people. Yet she made it, nearly falling out the open door into the street.

Bolina sucked in a deep breath, wondering if it was the first since he'd kissed her. Between her whirling head and her racing heartbeat, she could have happily slid to the ground and stared up at the dome above, just reliving that incredible kiss.

"Wait!"

She heard the shout from behind her, and knew she couldn't stay here.

Bolina bolted, not caring where her feet took her, as long as it was away.

The patter of running feet behind her spurred her into going faster still. She couldn't seem to catch her breath, yet still she ran. Most of the shops here were shut, dark windows yawning like black holes on either side of her. She'd have dived into a black hole right now, if it offered her an escape, but the shops were all dark and silent.

All but one. The front of this shop was dark, true, but a light burned out the back, in the office or the preparation area, while someone worked late. She glimpsed glass tanks with something swimming inside.

Bolina shoved at the door, which didn't budge. Growling, she reached up to wave at the motion sensor, and the door hissed open. She staggered inside, knowing that the blackness edging her vision had little to do with the darkness of simulated night. No, this was her body failing to retain consciousness after being pushed to the point of exhaustion.

A familiar voice called out a greeting, and Bolina nearly cried. Serendipity had led her to the one place she would be safe.

The door hissed closed behind her, but Bolina didn't notice. She grabbed for the nearest thing to help keep her upright – a waist-high fish tank with scuttling creatures on the bottom. Too late she realised that the top of the tank was open, and her arms splashed into the water.

A shadow loomed behind her. Bolina was too tired to even turn her head to see.

Arms caught her around the middle, tipping her headfirst into the tank.

Bolina panicked, trying to brace her arms against the glass walls, reaching desperately for the top to haul herself out, but all she did was slide down the slippery glass, unable to find any purchase.

"Stop fighting," that familiar voice said, sounding far away.

Too exhausted to argue, Bolina complied, letting her body sink into the water. As her vision darkened, she thought she glimpsed a flash of fire before everything faded to black.

You can read the rest of Sven's story, *Poseidon*, HERE

Click here to get started – https://demelzacarlton.com/readerquiz/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Demelza Carlton has always loved the ocean, but on her first snorkelling trip she found she was afraid of fish.

She has since swum with sea lions, sharks and sea cucumbers and stood on spray drenched cliffs over a seething sea as a seven-metre cyclonic swell surged in, shattering a shipwreck below.

Demelza now lives in Perth, Western Australia, the shark attack capital of the world.

The Ocean's Gift series was her first foray into fiction, followed by her suspense thriller Nightmares trilogy. She swears the Mel Goes to Hell series ambushed her on a crowded train and wouldn't leave her alone.

Want to know more? You can follow Demelza on Facebook, Twitter, Google+ , YouTube or her website, Demelza Carlton's Place at: www.demelzacarlton.com

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